

April 26, 2015  
The National Presbyterian Church  
**Fellow Followers: “God’s Scoundrel”**  
Genesis 28:1-28  
David A. Renwick

Over the next few months in our sermons we’re looking together at people in the Bible, personalities in the Bible, saints and sinners, the good, the bad and the ugly. We are doing so not only so we can learn by their example how to live and think (and how not, in some cases, to live and think!), but so that we can know and be shaped by our family history, our family heritage, the history and stories of those to whom we are related not by flesh and blood but by faith. These people are in our family tree, united with us by a common faith.

Last week we began this series by looking at a man by the name of Nicodemus, a person who lived in the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom Jesus said (in John 3), ‘You need to be born again. You need to be born from above (‘again’ and ‘above’, are both valid translations). You need to be born of the Spirit.’ You need to be born a second time if you are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. If you are to live within the realm of God, and even if you’re going to be able to see that it exists, you must (that is, it’s non-negotiable) be ‘born again.’

Now a great deal of ink has been spilled writing about the meaning of the phrase “born again.” What I said last week was this: that when it comes to understanding the phrase and Jesus’ intent, most people, at least in public perception, think of it as a call to have a conversion experience – a momentary but profound occurrence in which something remarkable happens that changes our life forever; an experience similar, perhaps, to the experience I had when I was 13 years of age: my life was changed forever because of words that I heard about Jesus Christ at a summer camp, and a decision that I made there: from that moment on my direction in life was changed forever.

But the fact is this – that in the story of Nicodemus in John 3, the story in which we hear Jesus speak about the necessity of being born again in his conversation with Nicodemus, the fact is that Nicodemus, as far as we can tell, never has such a clear cut experience as this. Indeed through the pages of John’s gospel where we see Nicodemus on a number of different occasions he never seems to be on the fast train to Heaven. There is no radical experience in his life that we can point to as “a born again experience.” On the other hand, we can certainly point to stages in his life where his life changes, such that he is not the same person at the end of the story as he was at the beginning. But there is no dramatic revelation at some point where everything changes in his life. He’s on the slow track to faith in Jesus Christ, not the fast track.

But, having said that, if ever there is anybody in the scripture who is an unsung hero and who we will undoubtedly see in the Kingdom of God, one who counts on Jesus as his Lord, his Savior and his master, it is surely Nicodemus. After breaking with his friends who want to break God's law in order to arrest Jesus (John 7), we find Nicodemus at the end of John's gospel (John 19) at or nearby the cross of Jesus when almost all Jesus' closest followers have run away out of fear. But Nicodemus is there, and he is there with a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea taking Jesus' body down from the cross and burying it in a tomb. This was no small thing – a risky, risky business (knowing what his friends and the Roman authorities might say), but he is there, he is there for Jesus the whole way, which means, surely, that if anyone is born again, it's Nicodemus. Which indicates to me that being born again is not so much about a past dramatic experience (though I'm grateful for that experience as are many of you), as about a present experience in which *we find ourselves in one way shape or form, whether because of the fast track or the slow track, within a new sphere, within a new family, with a new parent and new siblings.*

After all isn't that the evidence that you were born the first time? Not that you remember it: who here remembers their first birth? None of us! But we all know we were born; born into a family, where there are parents, for good or ill, and there are siblings, and often many others in the family surrounding us. That family of birth affects who we are forever whether we like it or not. And so too does our spiritual family following a second birth.

A second birth is like an adoption into a different family. A new family. The scripture speaks about our faith as a faith in which we are indeed adopted into the family of God (John 1:12), and by the power of the Spirit we cry out to God as our Father. Says the Apostle Paul, "When you cry out 'Abba, Father'" to God, and it's real, when you know it to be true, that's the Holy Spirit at work within you, says Paul (Romans 8). The Spirit of adoption is the Spirit of second birth. When you've been born again you know you are in this new family, and that family is going to change your life forever as with adoption. You move from within a sphere of some measure of brokenness and dysfunction (or there would be no need for adoption) into a new sphere, which you hope is functional, healing, life-giving; and those new parents and those new siblings, that new environment, that new realm, that new Kingdom is going to affect your life from that moment on forever.

And not only the new parents and the new siblings in the present, but the family history from the past. The family heritage will affect us as well forever; it too is going to be part and parcel of who we are and who we become. So let me mention again a movie I mentioned last Sunday, *The Blind Side*. Some of you may have seen it; some of you may have not. It's a good movie to watch. I can thoroughly recommend it. It's a true story about a man called Michael Oher who plays professional football for Carolina Panthers (formerly for Baltimore). When he was a child Michael was adopted – adopted into a family that changed his life forever, and after high school went on to play football at the University of Mississippi. He went to Mississippi not because his family of origin had any connection with the University of Mississippi whatsoever; but his new

family did. In fact they were passionate about Ol' Miss football! and he caught the bug! Their passion became his passion, their history became his history – his life was affected forever by their heritage; their present as well as their past being transferred into his life because he now was in their family.

The same is true of our lives in the spiritual realm as well. When God lays his hand upon us by the Holy Spirit he calls us not only to believe but to belong – to belong to him, to belong to his people and to be impacted not only by who God is, made known to us through Jesus Christ, but to be impacted by the family of faith around us. And that family of faith includes those who are with us now, those in the pews beside you, brothers and sisters in Christ, brothers and sisters in faith: the church as a community is an essential part of what God wants to use to mold and shape our lives – we're to be impacted not only by fellow believers right here and now but by those who are part of our family history going way back in time not only to the time of Jesus but far back beyond that.

So when we read the Bible what we find in the Bible is not only a set of rules and regulations about how to live (though some of those are there); what we find in the Bible is not only some deep and profound theology to stretch our thinking about life (though that is there too); but a significant part, a huge part in fact, of the Bible is about people. People! And why about people? Because they are our family. This is our heritage. The Bible is “ancestors.com” -- from the Bible we learn who we are, where we come from, what our heritage is and that's why we're doing what we're doing in this sermon series! That's why we read the book: not just for theology; not just for rules about life; but to find who we are, where we come from, within the family of God. People of faith before us who are mentors on the one hand, and family members on the other, each of them impacting who God wants us to be, alongside those with whom we live out our faith right here and now.

So today and next Sunday, we're going to focus on one of these ancestors by faith, a man by the name of Jacob who takes us back to the very roots of our family, some 1800 years before the birth of Christ, the roots of our family by faith. We're going to be thinking about this man called Jacob who also had another name given to him by God and that second name was Israel. So Jacob and Israel are one and the same person.

We tend to think of Israel as the name of a nation but it is only the name of a nation secondarily; first of all it was given to a person – a person who had 12 sons and those 12 sons became the parents as it were of the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 tribes descended from Jacob. One of those 12 sons was a man by the name of Judah and from the name Judah we get the word Jew. So the Jews are the descendants of Jacob or Israel, and to their tribe belongs our Savior Jesus Christ; and so we by faith belong to them. We by faith go all the way back through Jesus and the tribe of Judah, all the way back to Jacob. So Jacob is this incredibly important person within our family history, within our family by faith.

And yet, when we go back to Jacob what we discover is what we often discover when we go back in time and look at our family members - some of the family members that are in our family

we would rather they not be in our family at all! And Jacob is one of those! He's one whom we perhaps would rather not be in our family or we not in his family at all, because in his early years at least, Jacob was a scoundrel, Jacob was a rogue, he was a piece of work. In fact as I read the story of Jacob in the early years of his life (Genesis 25-28) I find absolutely nothing that is attractive about his life at all.

If you think about some of the rogues and the scoundrels who are presented in movies and stories on the television or the big screen there's often something good about them. There's often something redeeming about them or lovable about them: lovable rascals and rogues. Sometimes they're played by actors like Robert Redford and Paul Newman, or Johnny Depp and Roger Moore – characters like Jack Sparrow or Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, or the Saint. There's something about them which is attractive, and you want to take their side.

But when it comes to Jacob there's just not much there to love. In fact Jacob as he's presented to us in scripture, at least to begin with, is a self-centered narcissistic, manipulative back stabbing liar! And he's in our family by faith. This is who he is. A self-centered, narcissistic, manipulative, back stabbing liar, who takes advantage of other people. We don't mind it if they're like Robin Hood taking advantage of those who can afford to be taken advantage of (!) but Jacob takes advantage his own brother and even of his own father. And at their moment of greatest weakness. He doesn't hold back. He goes in for the kill. He skewers them. To me, at least, there's nothing attractive about his character and behavior at all.

So, for example, Genesis 25, we read this about his relationship with his brother, his slightly older twin brother, Esau.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, his brother Esau came in from hunting in the field and was famished. Esau said to Jacob let me eat some of that red stew for I am famished and Jacob says, first sell me your birthright.

That is, 'you hand over all the rights and privileges that are yours simply because you are the first-born child.' And in some societies still today, birth order is hugely significant. So Jacob demands that Esau hand over this birthright, as a trade for some stew! Stew for handing over all the privileges of being a first-born child. Not exactly a fair trade. But Jacob knows that he "has" his brother. Esau is absolutely famished and says quite casually, "I'm about to die of hunger. Of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob doesn't take Esau's word as sufficient, and tells Esau to add an oath -- Swear to it! So we read, "Esau swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob for a pot of stew." It may have been a joke to Esau, but Jacob takes the matter with absolute seriousness, manipulating his brother for his own ends.

And then there's the story that we read from Genesis 27. Here we come face to face with the power of family dysfunction to be passed on from one generation to another. So, in this biblical family, father Isaac clearly has chosen Esau as his favorite son, and mother Rebecca clearly has chosen younger son Jacob as her favorite. And not only Jacob, but Rebecca wants for her favored son all the status of the older son. Jacob doesn't get his passion to be "first at any price" from nowhere. It belongs first to Rebecca who passes the trait on to her son, and will even be willing

to deceive her husband to get what she wants -- she's a deceiver too -- so that her husband Isaac will give the family blessing, not just the privileges of the first born, but the overt blessing to Jacob, and not to Esau.

This is no small matter. So the privileges of the first born (the birthright) is one thing, involving material blessings of all kinds. Then there is the blessing, the overt word of the family patriarch being passed on from generation to generation. If we were to think of a modern day equivalent, I'd say that this blessing is rather like the words spoken at a Presidential inauguration. Before the inauguration we know who's going to be President: we've had our election, we've seen the results. And you might say that from the moment the results come in it's a done deal: we could just drift into the new administration -- but we don't. We don't just drift in. We have this moment of change. A word is said and that word is important for starting something that is new. There is something empowering about that word. Something sobering about that word; so that when somebody enters a new "office" they're not just the ones who speak, saying for example, "I'm now it." But somebody else says it, and the affirmation of the other is critical: "You're it! And, by the way, you not only have privileges, you also have responsibilities. So that word, that spoken moment is powerful.

And Rebecca wants that moment and she wants that power and she wants that word for her younger son Jacob. And Jacob apparently wants it all as well. He's not just happy with the birthright, but wants the official word of blessing from his father. So he takes advantage of his father. He takes advantage of his father's blindness and with a cool confidence that in the end is absolutely convincing; he dresses up as if he were his brother. He speaks as if he were his brother. And three times he lies to his father about who he is, to convince his father that he is indeed his brother Esau. And Jacob does it with such conviction that he gets what he wants. He gets the blessing.

I am Esau your first born [DR: the first lie]. The Lord has granted me success in my hunting [DR: the second lie. It's because of God that I'm back so quickly. He even invokes God's name in this second lie]. Are you really my son Esau says his father [DR: to which in the third lie Jacob says] "I am." [DR: And then the words come. The words he's been waiting for, the Blessing from Isaac]: May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and the blessing ends with this: and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

And that's it. He gets what he wants. He gets exactly what he wants. But rather like Shakespeare's Macbeth killing Duncan to get the throne of Scotland, he really doesn't get what he wants at all. He gets it all; but he doesn't. He's empty. There's nothing there. Just this hollow sense of emptiness and worse than that -- when his brother Esau comes to his senses and realizes what's happened and his tears are dried, he swears that he will kill his brother (which is no idle

threat; Esau has the strength and will to do it). So Jacob has to flee for his life, and at that moment, we're not told this explicitly but just read the story, we come to realize he will never see his beloved mother, nor she her beloved son, ever again from that moment on. He gets what he wants but he doesn't. It's tragic, sad; it's awful, it's ugly. But it's fair, isn't it? In losing everything, Jacob gets what he deserves!! Loses everything for cheating his father and his brother. All alone, off on his own, he surely now is getting exactly what he deserves. Except he doesn't. That is, what we discover is that ugly as Jacob is, and as unlovable as Jacob is, God chases after him, but not to condemn him.

God has been strangely silent in the story up to this point (except for the fact that Jacob has taken God's name in vain, using God's name in one of his lies to his father). But God springs into action as it were, and now, even as Jacob flees for his life, when he is in the worst of all possible places, at the moment when he is surely beginning to realize that he has lost his family, and he is now in every sense in the middle of nowhere, God becomes real to him. It's through a dream in which God in effect says to him, "I don't care if nobody else loves you, I love you." And this word of love, this word of grace from God, will in time begin to change Jacob's life.

It's at a place that he calls Bethel that God catches up with Jacob. In Genesis 28 we read this story: Jacob, fleeing for his life, arrives at Bethel at night. He finds a stone for a pillow. He falls asleep and dreams of a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to Heaven.

"And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it, and the Lord stood beside him and said "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, and the God of your father Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring. And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring."

He didn't do anything to manipulate anyone this time to receive this blessing. It's a far greater "blessing" than the one he manipulated his father and brother to get. It's a blessing that comes from God out of sheer grace. And it's a blessing that we now know, from our historical perspective, has, in the course of time, come true: though Jacob's descendant Jesus, we and the whole world have been blessed, over the course of thousands of years. This blessing has come true! And God keeps on speaking and says,

"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land and I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you."

What a glorious promise from God about of God's utter faithfulness to this person who is utterly undeserving: faithless, unlovable, who would cheat even his blind father. But God will not let him go. Pursues him. Says, "I want you. I love you still. And I will be with you always."

And what does this mean for us? Well, at the least, it surely means for you and me that if Jacob is in the family, if Jacob is at the root of the family, then there is room in this family for all kinds of people: for anybody and everybody, including people we'd rather disqualify! We may

say to ourselves “I don’t want to be in that kind of family.” But God says “This is the kind of family I’ve chosen to have! And this is the family into which I invite you too! – yes, even you (and me!): no matter who you are, or what you’ve done, or where you’ve been.”

This is the family of God. This is the realm of God. This is the Kingdom of God. We may not like the fact that a person like Jacob is in the family, but the inescapable good news truth that flows from this is that if Jacob can get in, then so can we! There’s room for us too. Not because we earn it or deserve it, but by the grace of God which comes to us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul writes of this grace that comes to us from Christ like this (in Ephesians 2:8 he says): “For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. Not because of works lest anyone should boast.”

The invitation to enter God’s family is a gift of sheer grace. We do our thing in our own way, independent of God’s way, and yet God still pursues us until that moment or those moments (and for Jacob it would indeed be through many moments) until God becomes more real than anything else in our life, and we realize that the family that we want to belong to, the family that will nourish us and nurture us and strengthen us to be the people we want to be, is not just our family of origin, but the family of God.

This my friends is good news. If Jacob is in, anyone can be in, and that includes you and me. We have been called *not only to believe but to belong*: to belong forever (yes, forever!) within a Kingdom that will never fade. And our response, I trust, to such a call and invitation will be to say to God “YES! Will you really bring me in?” And God says, “Of course. I did it with Jacob; I’ll do it with you too. Come on into my household now and forever.”

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2015 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800

