

Wherever You Go . . .

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Genesis 28:10-19

We decide not to run only because there are many who would be left behind who cannot run as fast as we can, but also because in turning to the source of our fear, we have the possibility of finding a different way forward. . . Rarely is it good to run. . . .

David Whyte, *Consolations*

Jacob, whose name means “schemer,” or “supplanter” or “the-one-who-grabs-you-by-the-ankle-in-order-to-trip-you,” is on the run. Back in chapter 27, Jacob disguised himself as his brother, Esau, deceived his father, Isaac, and stole his brother’s rightful blessing, and now his brother is out to kill him. And consequently, his mother, Rebecca, who was central to the conspiracy of stealing the blessing, tells Jacob to run for his life. A lot of family drama has transpired before chapter 28, lots of behind-the-back stuff, and one family member grabbing at something that really wasn’t his to take.

It’s interesting to me that Jacob didn’t say to his mother something like: “Maybe I should go back and do the responsible thing and confess my crime,” or “Wow. I really messed up.” No. After his mother instructs Jacob to run, that’s what he does. He runs away from the choices he has made.

David Whyte, poet and author, writes, “Running away is what most human beings would like to do a great deal of the time . . . and yet, rarely is it good to run.”

Jacob is running away – running away from doing what is honorable, running away from family, running away from a brother who hates him, running away in order to protect his own self-interests.

Read Genesis 28:10-19

Prayer

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 139:7-10

Sermon

We have a cat who exhibits odd cat behaviors. Our daughter, Madeline, left this cat with us. The cat, named Luna, has a habit of following us wherever we go. (Maybe your cat does this!) Her identity is wrapped up in her human companions: upstairs, downstairs, into our walk-in closet; and whenever we’re taking a shower, she paws at the shower door and licks the glass.

Whenever Heather starts tapping on her computer, like Cary Grant carefully walking across a roof to steal diamonds, our cat gingerly walks across the computer keyboard. Our cat is also a fetching cat, but the only thing it will retrieve are ear plugs. You can throw an ear plug across the room and she will bring it back to you...i.e., if she thinks you are worthy. And, of course, our cat gets into trouble. Digging her claws into our couch or a chair, I yell, clap my hands and/or run toward her to warn her off, but then this only causes her to love me more and follow me more. It appears, the more she gets into trouble or annoys us, the more angry we become, the more our cat adores us.¹

It hit me this week that our cat, God, and the schemer, Jacob, share traits in common. The more Jacob gets into trouble, the more he runs away, the more he acts irresponsibly, digging his claws into mischief and deceit, the more God draws near to him and follows him wherever he goes. Over the years, in development of Judeo-Christian theology, some theologian from the past-- Karl Barth, John Calvin, Paul Tillich, James Cone, Allen Boesak, Desmond Tutu – some great theological mind must have observed how God appears to gravitate to people who stir up trouble and are not all that reliable.

I'm reminded of a time, years ago, when I called an Executive Presbyter at the Presbytery office to complain about another pastor. I vented on how this other pastor did or said things that I found inappropriate and rude, but then I also noted how his congregation adored him. In another life, this pastor must have been my cat. In essence, my Executive Presbyter counseled me, "It's mysterious how God seems to choose the oddest people, the most imperfect people, people with all kinds of flaws, to bring about God's kingdom."

At the close of day, as the sun begins to set, and after running all day, in the middle of nowhere, Jacob runs out of gas. He takes a stone, puts it under his head for his pillow, and drifts off to sleep. And Jacob dreams. He dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder; he dreams of angelic beings riding up and down a kind of divine escalator. And while this dream has inspired hymn writers and interpreters of dreams, this week, I found myself coming back again and again to the promise God makes to Jacob:

"¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Does God realize who God is talking to?

Did God not get the intelligence briefing on Jacob?

Does God not understand that this person deceived his father, stole his brother's blessing, and is now running away from his crime?

¹ When we leave the house, our cat does one more thing. She leaps up on our washer and dryer and peeks out a side window as we pull out of the driveway. We can see her looking at us through the glass. She wonders where her human companions are going now. At least, I imagine she wonders where we are going. I don't know. What I do know is that when we return, she will start following us around the house.

Doesn't God know the meaning of Jacob's name? The one who trips other people up and makes you fall. That's who God is talking to.

Watch out, God! Jacob has a history of grabbing people's ankles, and he may be trying to grab yours.

This person is nothing but trouble.

Even after Jacob wakes up, do you really believe Jacob fully comprehends what God has proclaimed and promised him? Indeed, look what he does: he takes his stone pillow, stacks it on top of other stones, pours oil over it, and marks the spot as the place of God's presence. Almost as if to say, "See, this is a sacred site. This is where God resides. This is special place and I had a dream here one night to prove it....and some day in the future, I'll set up a ticket booth right over there and charge people \$15 each to see it."

To me, after Jacob wakes up, he is still a heel-grabber, unredeemed. He grabs his brother's blessing; he grabs opportunity; he grabs at anything and claims it for himself before someone else does. Finders, keepers, losers, weepers, right? Jacob's priority is himself and no one -- not even God -- will get in his way.

John Holbert, Old Testament professor, writes:

Jacob, like so many of us, has forgotten that it is God's promise to give and not Jacob's promise to grab."

What does that mean? What is John Holbert saying to us? I think John Holbert is saying that our God is the giver of promises, the purveyor of grace, the one who does not give up on the good or bad. And this promise to Jacob, to grabbers, to me, to you, to all of us, is that God will keep us, guard us, and be with us wherever we go.

God's Spirit is not rooted in one place; God's presence is not locked into a stack of old stones or in one idea or in the person who gets there first and grabs it. Because the God I love and worship and believe in goes with us. . .wherever we go.

The Prophet Isaiah declares:

Thus says the Lord who created you, O Jacob. . . I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. . . Do not fear, for I am with you. Is. 43 ff.

Over the years, I have encountered many folks on the run: running away from their families, running away from past mistakes, running from words said in haste and anger, running away from alcoholism and drug addiction, running away from someone, running away from a bruised relationship, running out of fear, running out of a need for self-preservation just like Jacob. And these runners sometimes run to a church and talk to a pastor about it.

And I'm here to tell you, if you are on the verge of running away from something, before you start running, talk to someone about it. Come and talk with Lynne or me (I'm going on vacation in Italy for a few weeks, but I'll be back.) talk to a pastoral deacon in this church, talk to the person who will be standing up here after worship this morning. Talk to someone who will listen...and my hunch is that this

person will tell you, in not so many words, that God has never left you and that God goes with you wherever you go.

When I was 6 or 7 years old, I remember making the decision to run away from home. I'm not sure what my motivation was. Looking back, I do remember my mother buying me a large picture book that contained the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. I loved that book. I still have it somewhere. Maybe Twain's stories of two friends running away from home inspired me. So, in planning my escape, the first thing I did was tell my mom. I announced to her that I was running away. And what did my mother do? How did she respond? She packed me a lunch, kissed me on the forehead, and sent me on my way.

If you know someone who thinking about running away, running away from trouble, from difficulties, from responsibilities, from life, from God---take that person in your hands right now. Take him or her or them into your heart. Offer a prayer for that person. And somewhere in midst of your prayer for this person, recall God's promise: that the God of Jacob, the God of Moses and the God of Jesus, is with this person even now, and that this same God is with us. . . to keep us and protect us wherever we go. Amen.