

June 24, 2012

Jacob
In Uncertain Times
Genesis 28:10-22

Opening words: The Duke of Wellington, the British military leader who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was not an easy man to serve under. He was brilliant, demanding, and not one to shower his subordinates with compliments. Yet even Wellington realized that his methods left something to be desired. In his old age a young lady asked him what, if anything, he would do differently if he had his life to live over again. Wellington thought for a moment then replied, "I'd give more praise," he said. Does anyone here need a word of encouragement?

This is sermon number four in my summer sermon series on Jacob. If you have been with us each week then you will remember these basic facts. First, Jacob's father was Isaac and his grandfather was Abraham. Second, Jacob had a fraternal twin brother. His name was Esau. According to the scriptures, he was born red and hairy. He must have been a handsome lad. Third, Jacob was both an opportunist and a cheat. He seized the opportunity to trade for the birthright for a bowl of stew. He cheated his brother out of the blessing by exploiting his own father's poor eyesight. Today, we find Jacob on the run because of his own deceitfulness. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 28:10-22. Let me call this message *In Uncertain Times*.

Genesis 28:10-22 10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. 11 When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending¹ and descending on it. 13 There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." 16 When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." 18 Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes

to wear 21 so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God 22 and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

One of the greatest players in the history of baseball was Willie Mays. In his career he hit 660 home runs and stole more than 300 bases. However, he was not an instant star. As a matter of fact, at first he struggled. He only had one hit in his first twenty-six at bats. He admitted later he was afraid his career would only last a few weeks. The turning point for Mays occurred when his manager, Leo Durocher, found him crying in the dugout. The coach put his arm around Mays and said, "What's the matter, son?" Mays said, "I can't hit up here. I belong in the minor leagues." Durocher said to Mays, "As long as I'm manager of the Giants, you'll be my centerfielder." You know how the story ends. It wasn't long before Mays began hitting the ball. He hit his way into the Baseball Hall of Fame. All Mays needed was a word of encouragement.

William Arthur Ward once said, *"Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you."* Does anyone here need a word of encouragement? If you have ever needed a word of encouragement say, **"Amen!"** Let us look at the text together.

Jacob has just received his father's blessing. It is important that you remember the significance of the blessing. It was more than words of appreciation from a parent to a child. Not every child received the blessing. Usually, it went to the oldest son. Why? Because normally, the oldest son was seen as the obvious leader. The one being blessed received two things. The first thing he received was authority. At his father's death, he would become the head of the family. With the authority came responsibility and respect. I have never met a person who didn't want to be respected. However, being the head of the family was a well paying job. The one being blessed also received a double share of his father's inheritance.

Last week's story tells us cheaters sometimes do win. Do you remember? Jacob tricked his father into blessing him. Due to his poor eyesight, Isaac blessed the wrong son. Isaac really wanted to bless his favorite son, Esau. Instead, he blessed Jacob. It was Jacob who received the respect and the cash. It worked out for him but it did not work out for the one who lost the blessing, Esau. Genesis 27:41 says, "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing." It goes on to say Esau planned to kill Jacob. Isaac's dysfunctional family is now completely fractured. I can not say this too strongly. Jacob was intimidated by his brother. He is so intimidated he decides to run away. He left everything he knew and goes to live in the land of his mother's people in Harran. Once he arrives his uncle, Laban, will care for him.

Today, we find Jacob traveling toward his new home. Once completed he would

have traveled five hundred miles to between Beersheba to the south and Haran in the north. In that distance he would have left the Promised Land and entered into a brand new place. He must have been in an emotional state. He didn't just leave his problem, Esau. He left everything and everyone he knew. Just think about it for a minute. His mother was gone. His father was gone. His friends were gone. His favorite food was gone. The place that he slept was gone. The routine of his day was gone. It is amazing. Everything he took for granted suddenly became very important. Do I have to say it? Do I really have to say it? You know it is true. When life changes, it changes rapidly. A short time ago Jacob was celebrating his great victory. He had received the blessing! Now he is traveling alone feeling defeated. He feels very small. He finds himself in uncertain times. That is where the scripture comes to life.

Have you ever felt very small? Have you ever found yourself in uncertain times? It may have been the time you moved to a new community? Like Jacob, everything you knew was suddenly gone. You had to get new doctors. Your children had to make new friends. Your house felt more like a residence than a home. You were living in uncertain times. It may have been the time you were sitting next to the hospital bed. Your loved one was in the bed sleeping but you were wide awake. The magazines had lost their interest days ago. You sat there looking at all the machines waiting for the doctor to return with the latest test results. It may have been the time you were waiting for your children to return home. The minutes dragged like hours. Oh, you trust your children but you don't trust the crazy world in which we live. It may be been the time you had to admit your marriage was over. Mr. or Mrs. Right is now Mr. or Mrs. Wrong. Now you have to tell your world you made another mistake. It may have been the time you lost your job. The money disappeared but your bills kept coming? When was the last time you found yourself living in uncertain times?

If you have ever found yourself living in the middle of uncertain times then you can relate to Jacob. Everything he knew was gone and he is facing an unknown future. The scriptures tell us Jacob experienced three things in his uncertain times. Those experiences helped him survive. Those three things can help you survive the next time you find yourself in the middle of uncertain times. Those are the three things I want to look at today. I hope you remember these three things. You may not need them today because your life is good. However, you will need them the next time you find yourself in the middle of uncertain times. If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"** Like last week, I am going to move through my points quickly and end with a major illustration.

God's Promises

The first thing you need to remember in uncertain times is God's promises. In verses ten through fifteen we are told Jacob's journey last more than a day. It says in time the sun sets and Jacob stopped for the night. He must have been exhausted

because he places a stone under his head and he fell asleep. He begins to dream and in the dream God reminds him of the divine promises made in the past. His descendents will be blessed in many ways. They will be numerous and will occupy a land. They will be respected and a blessing to others. Those words became true. We are all blessed because Jesus was a descendent of Jacob. This is the point. God kept his promises to Jacob and God keeps his promises to us. The next time you find yourself in uncertain times remember God's promises. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

God's Presence

The second thing you need to remember in uncertain times is God's presence. In verse fifteen God says to Jacob, *"I am with you."* Jacob may have felt like he was alone but he wasn't. God was with him and God is with us!

Remember these three Bible verses. Psalm 23 says, *"I fear no evil because you are with me."* The Great Commission in Matthew 28 says, *"I am with you always until the very end of time."* Hebrews 13:5 says, *"God will never leave you or forsake you."* King David, Jesus and the author of the letter of Hebrews knew what Jacob discovered that night. We are never alone. The next time you find yourself in uncertain times remember God's presence. There has never been a moment in your life when you have been orphaned by God. God has always been with us and God is with us right now! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

God's Protection

The third and final thing we need to remember in uncertain times is God's provision. Finish verse fifteen with me. God says to Jacob, *"I am with you and will protect you."* What does that verse mean? Does it mean that nothing bad is going to happen to him? No! Bad things happen to us all the time. We live in Satan's playground. Everyday we play the part of Job. Satan wants you to denounce your faith. However, it does mean that that God's plan for the salvation of the world can not be frustrated. In the end, God wins! The next time you find yourself in uncertain times remember God's protection. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Last week I attended Annual Conference at Lakeside. There are approximately seven hundred and fifty churches in the East Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Clergy and lay representatives of those congregations gather annually to conduct the business of the general church. I will be honest with you. Annual Conference has changed through the years for me. There was a time I knew almost everyone being ordained. There were four Elders ordained this year. I didn't know any of them. I did know some of the people mentioned in the memorial service. There were eighteen of them. They were former District Superintendents and conference leaders. The group I was the most familiar with was the retirees. Thirty-three people retired this year. I sleep with one of them. Kathryn cut her ties with Methodism after thirty-one years of service. Generally, our lives won't change.

She will continue serving as the Director of Protestant Campus Ministry, continue leading volunteer in mission trips to Russia, continue her interim at the Paradise United Church of Christ and lifeguard at the YMCA. One of people truly retiring was Russ Libb. Today is his last Sunday in the Berlin Center United Methodist Church, where he has served for thirty-eight years. I think we need to prayer for that congregation and his replacement, Mark Vincent.

It is rare to find a United Methodist pastor, who has served the same church for thirty-eight years. The bishop recognized Russ' uniqueness and interviewed him during the retirement service. He asked him about the various bishops who served East Ohio through the years. He asked about the various District Superintends he had served under through the years. He asked about how his congregation had changed through the years. The best question was the last question. He asked Russ what advice he would give to this year's ordination class. Russ thought a moment and told this story.

He said several months ago, he was called to the death bed of a parishioner. She was living in uncertain times. She was one of the original people at his church. She knew she was near the end and told Russ she had two questions. He said, "Ask your questions. " She looked at Russ and said, "Will I get into heaven? " Russ said, "I have known you for thirty-eight years. You know Jesus so you are going to heaven. That is what the Lord promised." She asked, "When I get to heaven, will I see Charles? " (Her deceased husband.) Russ said, "Yes!" The woman looked at Russ and said, "When I get to heaven the first thing I am going to do is tell Jesus you have been good to me." Russ said, "I had to fight back the tears. I wasn't worthy. I would tell this year's ordination class to offer them Jesus."

When was the last time you found yourself in uncertain times? When you are, look for Jesus! God kept all of his promises to us in the name of Jesus. In the end nothing really matters but Jesus. He is our constant companion and guardian. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!** "