

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**Title: God's Great Grace it is has Brought Us****Lesson: Genesis 28:10-19 NRSV**

Christians are sometimes referred to as "Beings on the way." We, Methodists, believe prevenient grace, which means God is at work in our lives before we know it. When the Holy Spirit touches our hearts, we can realize that we are sinners, and repent our sins. Every moment we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness until the day we return to the dust. Jesus said "Yet, today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way." (Luke 13:33 NRSV) We follow the way Jesus walked through this process of confession and absolution. That's why we are referred to as "Beings on the way."

I'd like to introduce Jacob's journey of life through today's scripture. According to Genesis, he had ambition in life and was full of passion for life. The scripture tells that "Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran." (10)

Who is Jacob? He is the second Son of Isaac. Where is Beer-sheba? It is like the hometown where Jacob's father Isaac finally settled where he was living as a stranger. Then, where is Haran? If Beer-sheba is the southern end, then Haran is the same as the northern end. 'Leaving Beer-sheba and going to Haran' means that he is on his way from a safe place where life is guaranteed to an unknown place where any future is not guaranteed.

In verse 10, it uses the word, "left." This word doesn't mean taking a light trip or taking a walk, but it is an expression used when talking about salvation events that are dramatic, like the Exodus from Egypt (Exo13:3) Jacob's departure is an exodus in a good way and an escape in a bad way. By the way, the scripture describes his departure from God's perspective.

Then, why did Jacob have to leave? He was the twins. They were both born at about the same time, but unfortunately Jacob came out a little later. Due to the slight time difference, Jacob didn't get the birthright. In that society, the first son had many meanings. Above all, the firstborn was blessed by God. So, Genesis describes the sorrowful heart of Jacob, the second born: "Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel." (Gen 25:26 NRSV)

But, Jacob didn't embrace it as fate. As he grew up, he struggled to get the birthright. When Jacob was cooking a stew, his brother was very hungry. So, he sold his birthright to Jacob because he despised it. (Gen25:33-34) Also, he deceived his father into getting his blessing instead of his older brother, and he was eventually blessed. Therefore, his older brother became angry and finally tried to kill his brother just as Cain killed Abel because he lost his birthright and his father's blessing.

After a lot of thought and concern, Jacob's parents decided to send him to Haran. That is why he had to leave Beer-sheba and go to Haran. He ran away from his brother for three or four days and arrived at a place called Luz. He is on the move from a familiar and safe place to which he has lived for a long time to an unfamiliar and unstable place. His life is going through a new way.

His journey was tiring. He was lonely, he was anxious, and he couldn't eat well when he was hungry, perhaps he was feeling all the misery of life, and he came to a certain place and lie down in that place and fell asleep.

Surprisingly, by the way, he saw in his dream a wonderful mystery of heaven. "There was 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..." (12-13)

Jacob was surprised because he thought the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac was only in his hometown. He never knew that he would meet God on his journey as a fugitive and a sinner. He awoke from his sleep and exclaimed in excitement: "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" (16)

That place that Jacob mentioned was a wilderness that has nothing. That place was an unprotected blind spot in life. That place was where no future could be guaranteed. Therefore, that place was where he had to give up his greed and ambition and hold on to God. His escape journey was the way to meet God. When he gave up everything he had pursued in his life and found only God, the Lord met him through a dream. His desperation became the key to meeting God. Like Jacob, we also sometimes face difficult moments in life. That moment is very hard but maybe it is the moment when we can feel the grace of the Lord.

In that place, God promises Jacob: “The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your descendants.” (13-14) “Know 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.” (15) And Jacob was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” (17)

He experienced God directly for the first time in his life. Although it was a dream, it was a big surprise to him because God met him as the God of Jacob. That fact was of great comfort to him. He could be sure that God met him and loved him. Although he deceived his father and older brother to get the birthright and blessing, God encouraged him to leave rather than rebuke him. He was freed from the position of a sinner and was truly restored in God.

Personally, verse 15 means a lot to me as well. My wedding date was set, and Esther and I visited my pastor. For your information, I married Esther on January 6th, 2018. Back then we had all kinds of worries and anticipation as our wedding date and the date we were going to America approached because married life and living in America were the new to us. He understood our situation because he had served Korean immigrant church in California for about 30 years. While he was serving the church and living in the states, he engraved Genesis 28:15 on his heart. It tells that “Know 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.” (NRSV) Living in the states as a Korean and a stranger is not easy. Living with language and cultural barriers and not being able to see our families when we want to see them sometimes frustrate us. When I do, I remember Genesis 28:15, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” I cannot deny that He has kept us, and I am standing before you by the grace of the Lord.

“God's great grace it is has brought us All this way in faith-ful-ness.
 God's un-bound-ed love which sought us Hoe can tongue of man ex-press?
 His strong hand is watch-ing o'er us Wheth-er sleep-ing or a-wake.

He makes all things pleasant for us In the Lord for Jesus' sake.” – God’s Great Grace it is has Brought Us (The Korean Church Hymnal)

Getting back to Jacob’s story, he called that place Bethel, not Luz. Bethel means the house of God. The door to heaven, the house of God is not located in a specific place. The place where we have a heart that depends on God becomes the house of God. The place when we call on God’s name becomes the house of God.

The change of the name of the land from Luz to Bethel means a complete change in Jacob’s life. His encounter with God was a turning point in his life. His escape journey is no longer the journey of a sinner because God is with him, and leads his way.

Although he was born as the second son, he strived to get the birthright and blessing, but now those things are no longer important to him because he found hope only in God. He found a reason and purpose of life in only God. It was only by the grace of God that Jacob reached a dramatic turning point in his desperate and miserable life.

Our life’s journey is not much different from Jacob’s escape journey. He wanted to be recognized by his parents. He thought that he could be recognized by his parents and God when he gets the birthright and blessing. But contrary to his expectations, his ambitions for them and efforts didn’t help him get recognition from his parents and God. Rather, it caused the family to split, Jacob was nearly killed by his brother, had to leave from his hometown, and suffered hard times for 20 years in Haran. It was neither the birthright nor the blessing that changed his life. It was only the grace of God, and it was a relationship with God.

All the difficulties in his life were a way for him to meet God. God was always with him and became the destination of his life. Beloved, all the difficulties in our lives may be a way for us to meet God. God is always with us and become the destination of our lives.

May the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob be our God, guide our lives, and save us from all the difficulties of life by His grace.

Amen.