

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Genesis 29:15-28

SERMON SERIES: Lessons from the Life of Jacob

SERMON TITLE: Promises Delayed

Lessons from the Life of Jacob is the theme of our 4-part sermon series. As we've seen, Jacob was the child of God's promise, and yet a scoundrel. He enticed his older twin brother Esau to forfeit his birthright for a pot of stew; he tricked his blind father into blessing him instead of Esau; and he fled from his family to keep an enraged Esau from killing him.

And then, on his way to seek protection from his uncle Laban in Haran, he stopped in a place that wasn't at all special, and he fell asleep--and he dreamed. He dreamed of angels ascending and descending on a ladder reaching from earth to heaven; and in his sleep, he heard God speak to him a promise--a promise of offspring, of land, and of God's abiding presence with him. And he named the place Bethel, the house of God.

When Jacob drew near to Haran, he met his cousin Rachel, Laban's youngest daughter--and it was love at first sight. Jacob was welcomed into Laban's house where he stayed for a month. This brings us to this morning's scripture lesson from **Genesis 29:15-28**. Listen for the word of God.

Well, you've already heard me admit it: I don't like to wait, especially when something good has been promised to me. Patience is not my strong suit. For example, back in my younger days, about a month out from my birthday, my mom and dad would usually asked me what I wanted as a present for my birthday. Now I was usually ready with a response and sometimes I would even suggest that they go ahead and give the present to me early so that I wouldn't have to wait for it. Needless to say, that never worked, but I did give try because I didn't want to wait for the gift that I knew was coming anyway.

How about you? How are you with waiting?

Well, as you could probably tell, this morning's story about Jacob involves waiting. And to be honest with you, if I had been in Jacob's shoes and I had to wait as long as Jacob waited for God's promise to be fulfilled in my life, God would have been hearing from me. I would have been hounding God with one persistent question: *How long, O Lord, how long?*

Let's go back to the promise for a moment. God spoke to Jacob in a dream at Bethel: *the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring....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.*

Now I can understand how the promise of offspring might take a little time, but why the delay in fulfilling the promise of the land? Jacob was already there. If it had been me, I would have said something like: *Now look, Lord, I'm already here on the land you are promising to me--so why don't you just give it to me now instead of having me leave it so that you can bring me back to it again at some future date? Why can't you just be with me here? Why don't you just send a woman or two out here for me to marry so that I can have my children here?*

But apparently, God doesn't work this way. In fact, after Jacob's encounter with God in his dream at Bethel, God is not mentioned again in the story until after Jacob has served Laban for fourteen years. Through all of Laban's deception in the switching of his two daughters and through all of Jacob's hard work, God is not mentioned once. But we know from the promise that God was with Jacob, not in the forefront, but in the background. God was working out God's purposes in response to the choices that Laban and Jacob made in their dealings with one another--so there was delay in the fulfillment of the God's promises to Jacob.

Jacob spent over twenty years with his Uncle Laban in Haran. And yes, there continued to be considerable dysfunction within this family; the trickery and the deception continued. But

through it all Jacob was blessed. By the time God told Jacob to leave Haran and return to the land of his ancestors, Jacob had children, including twelve sons whose names are those of the twelve tribes of Israel. And curiously enough, Jacob had the most children by Leah, the wife Jacob had not wanted. Leah was the mother of Judah through whom the Messiah would come; and Leah was the mother of Levi, the one who provided a line of priests for Israel.

Jacob had arrived in Haran with nothing, but he left Haran a prosperous man. The very delay in the fulfillment of the promise allowed time and space for Esau's rage against his brother to subside, setting the stage for a reconciliation between the two.

Even so, it's hard for me to wait. Patience is not my strong suit. So it's hard for me to trust God with promises delayed. And yet, in so many ways, that's the story of our faith. And it's not just Jacob: God promised Moses that the Hebrew people would be delivered from their bondage in Egypt and taken to *a land flowing with milk and honey*; and yet, it took forty years of wandering in the wilderness before God's people could enter the land. God promised a Messiah, and yet the people had to wait.

God has promised a day when nation will not lift up sword against nation, when swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when war is learned no more--and yet, there is still war. God has promised a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, God laying claim to all peoples, God dwelling among us to wipe every tear from our eyes; no more death, no more mourning and crying and pain. And yet, we wait still dying, still grieving, still crying, still suffering. So I think I'll ask God anyway: *How long, O Lord, how long?*

But God is with us--just as God was with Jacob--and sometimes just in the background. And God is still working with the stuff of lives--with the choices we make--and the predicaments we face. God is always working to bring God's promises to fulfillment--and blessings are still

bestowed along the way.

And isn't Jesus the sign for us? An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: ***“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”***

So we hold on to the promises. When everything around us crumbles and falls--we hold on to the promises. When we're tricked and deceived--we hold on to the promises. When the deal goes bad, or the joke is on us--we hold on to the promises. No matter the delays--we hold to the promises--we wait as long as it takes--because finally we put our trust in God. How did Isaiah put it? ***They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.***

Let me share a story with you about the power of holding on to the promises even in the most horrific of circumstances. As the forces under General Douglas MacArthur began to close in on the Japanese troops occupying the Philippines during World War II, the Japanese began to transport their Prisoners of War away from the advancing Allies. These were men who had already endured several years of unspeakable horrors in the Japanese death camps. And so many had cried to God: ***How long, O Lord, how long?***

Well, the POWs were crowded onto so-called Hell Ships for transport under conditions to gruesome to describe. On one particular Hell Ship, a Catholic priest held fast to the promises of God. He squeezed his way through the prisoners and ministered to each one by reciting the Lord's Prayer. The sound of his voice and words on his lips gave comfort to the dying and strength to the living. He was the embodiment of God with them. He was a blessing to them even in the midst of their anguished waiting.¹

¹ Stewart, Sidney. *Give Us This Day*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999.

Now I don't like to wait. Patience is not my strong suit. But Jacob as experienced, we sometimes have to wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. In the meantime, we're invited to trust God and to seek God's presence no matter how long the delay and look for signs of God's blessing along the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.