

## When Good Things Happen to Bad People

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 28:10-19a; John 1:43-51.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I've been looking for days at images of flooded towns and farms in Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota, and Illinois. I see a farmer's white frame house, his family home for three generations, inundated up<sup>to</sup> the roof in Mississippi flood waters. I see flooded fields of soy beans and corn, representing hours of hard, sweaty, farm labor, destroyed. I've listen to these good farm folk being interviewed... telling how their families have lived and worked this land for generations. I see good, hard-working, God fearing men and women watch, helplessly as their livelihood, their businesses, their homes are washed away. And I find myself saying, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The Bible doesn't offer much explanation. Rather, the Bible is filled with stories about good things happening to bad people. Adam and Eve sin and bring a horrible curse upon themselves and all their descendants but God comes to them in grace, clothes them and promises to crush the serpents head through one of Eve's descendants. Cain murders his brother, Abel, but God comes to him as a Savior, puts a mark on Cain so that others wouldn't take vengeance on this murderer. ~~Be~~ In the New Testament, the disciples of Jesus forsake him and deny him, yet three days after his death, he comes to them and says, "Peace be with you." Or think of how Saul persecuted Christians and sought their death, but God encountered Saul on the Damascus Road, converted him, and sent him into the world to preach the

Gospel to the Gentiles. <sup>The</sup> Bible is a book that contains one story after another of how God does good things for sinners like you and me. Those stories can be summed up in the words of Paul in Romans when he writes, "When we were yet enemies, Christ died for us."

We heard a story this morning of Jacob's first recorded encounter with the living God. It's the story of a good thing happening to a bad person.

First, take a look at Jacob. By all accounts, Jacob was not a good guy. He was a bad guy. You're familiar with the story. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers, the children of Isaac and Rebekah. Their grandfather was Abraham. Esau was an outdoorsman. Jacob is described as a "quiet man who loved to dwell in tents." He like to stay inside and do nothing. You've heard the story of how Esau came in from hunting all day, ~~fatigued~~, tired and hungry. Jacob said, "I'll fix you something to eat if you sell me your birthright." Esau, in his weakness and hunger, foolishly agreed. Jacob was a shrewd, hard dealing man who cared nothing for his brother.

You probably also remember how, when Jacob's father, Isaac, was an old man and blind, Jacob deceived him. Jacob dressed in the skins of animals like his brother, glued hair to his arms so that they'd feel like Esau's arms to his blind old father. Because he disguised himself to feel and smell like Esau, Jacob was able to deceive his father into giving him Esau's blessing. When Esau found out about this he threatened to kill Jacob. In fear, Jacob headed for the hills. He was running away, not only from his brother; he was running away from God as well. There's no evidence, whatsoever that Jacob felt any remorse for what he had done.

All of this is to say that Jacob was not a very nice guy. He was a bad guy.

Now, notice, secondly, how God deals with Jacob. During his flight from Esau, Jacob stops for the night at a certain place, takes a stone which he uses for a pillow and goes to sleep. And God graciously reveals himself to Jacob in the middle of the night.

This story tells us that God is gracious even to those who run away from God. Francis Thompson, a poor, sad, Christian poet who lived a hundred years ago in England, probably had Jacob in mind, as well as himself - and us - when he wrote "The Hound of Heaven" about his own flight from grace.

I fled him, down the night and down the days;  
I fled him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from him...  
From those strong feet that followed, followed  
after.

But with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat-- and a voice beat  
More instant than the feet--

That voice is round me like a bursting sea...  
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fleest me.

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee  
Save me, save only me...

Ah fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am he whom thou seekest...

This is what Jacob discovered. He was running away from the source of love, running away from grace. But he could not escape. God is too persistent in his love, too stubborn in his grace. And, when he was caught, he discovered that the

one chasing him was not his enemy, but his best friend. God does good things for bad people.

What was the good thing that God did for Jacob? God gave Jacob a dream and a promise. Jacob saw a ladder rising up from the bare rocks of the valley where he lay, reaching up into heaven. On this ladder was a great company of angels, some ascending to heaven, some descending to earth. Even from these bare, cold rocks there was a way to heaven, and even from heaven to these bare, cold rocks God sent down the comfort of his love.

This was the meaning of Jacob's dream. His ladder said that heaven was coming to earth and that heaven could be reached from earth; the angels coming down the ladder meant that God was reaching down for sorry earth and sinful people. The blessing of heaven was coming down to earth and earth's sorrows could be carried up again to heaven. The line between heaven and earth was open. The vision of the angels was the vision of the grace of God coming into human life. We Christians see this dream fulfilled in Jesus, God's son, who comes down from heaven to earth, links heaven and earth, and enables us to go to heaven.

God's grace grabs us and will not let us go. God keeps coming after us, and when we most want to leave him he subdues us by his love. He will not let us get away from him. He won't let us stop believing. He comes with a taste of pardon when I go wrong, comes with a quiet nudge of power when I feel helpless, comes with a subtle hint of hope when I lose courage. He opened heaven, put a ladder down to earth in Christ, and came with grace to us.

Third, Jacob awoke and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." When Jacob lay down to sleep that night he had no sense of the nearness of God but when he woke in the morning he said, "Surely the Lord *is*," not *was*, "in this place; and I ~~know~~ it not".

Listen to the words of Psalm 139. The psalmist writes,

Where can I escape from thy spirit?  
Where can I flee from thy presence?  
If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;  
If I make my bed in hell, again I find thee.  
If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning  
or dwell at the limit of the western sea,  
even there thy hand will meet me  
and thy right hand will hold me fast.

Wherever we are and whatever our circumstances the God of Jacob, the God of the psalmist and the God of Jesus is with us.

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" Jacob says. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." When Jacob realizes God's presence he calls this <sup>barren</sup> place a "house of God" and he takes the stone on which he has laid his head and sets it up as a sacred pillar. In other words, he makes this place a place of worship, a sanctuary.

Our tragedy is that like Jacob we often don't know that God is in ~~this~~ <sup>the</sup> places <sup>we find</sup> ourselves.

It's hard for some of us to realize God can be in this fellowship hall as well as in a well appointed sanctuary. God was in the auditorium of Oxford High School as well as here. Too often we forget God's presence. So most of us need churches and sanctuaries to help us realize God's presence. William Barclay writes that the aim of the people who lead worship is to make the congregation aware of the presence

of God and to make them certain that the God who is there is there to receive and help them.

I'd like to take this one step further: the aim of worship is also to help the congregation be aware of the presence of God once they've stepped outside of church at the end of worship. -- in the factory, classroom, home, playing field,

I hope that during this act of worship you have known something of God's presence. But surely, the Lord is in this place, even when we don't know it.

I hope this hour of worship will also help you to know God's presence once you've stepped outside this church building.

Wherever we are and whatever our circumstances we can say with Jacob, "Truly, the Lord is in this place".

Let us pray: Almighty God, in Jesus Christ you opened for us anew and living way into your presence. Give us pure hearts and constant wills to worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.