

Sermon: Genesis 28:10-19a

On the run... fleeing, facing and believing

Dear sisters and brothers,

it is an exciting story I would like to reflect on with you today. The story of Jacob or the „trickster“, which is the literal translation of his name.

I remember Jacob very well from my childhood days. In Sunday School we once looked at this very impressive picture of him lying on his back in the middle of nowhere, facing the starry sky and dreaming. And I designed one of the most colorful glittery angels who descended on that enormous ladder to bring the message of God. I remember how I wished I could lie there beside him and be a witness to the magic atmosphere. In my imagination Jacob was the luckiest man ever and I couldn't actually be bothered with the guilt that he was carrying nor with the struggle that came after that event. I guess it's time to put this scene in relation to the whole story and see the magic that lies in God's message rather than the beauty of angels floating up and down a ladder.

Jacob is actually a man on the run. It all starts out with a mean trick. Jacob disguises himself and pretends to be his brother Esau and thus Isaac, his blind father, blesses him instead of his brother. It is not any old blessing he is stealing that moment. It is the most meaningful blessing, the one Abraham received from God and which is now being passed on from generation to generation. There is lots of land involved in this heritage but more yet God's promise of a great people and his guiding hand to go with it. Isaac intended to give all that to Esau, his first born son, ... but now it belongs to Jacob. He steals it from his blind, dying father. What a horrible thing to do.

I don't even want to imagine the rage Esau goes through when he finds out about it but it's enough to make Jacob realize that his brother will kill him if he doesn't leave immediately.

So he packs a few things, kisses his mother good-bye and runs... away from his family. Away from his home and all the shelter that it has given him in all the years. He sets off to Haran, where his uncle lives, a place about 700 km away.

His head must be throbbing and his mind racing while he is leaving mile after mile behind under the burning sun. I can see him turning around every other minute, making sure nobody is following him. Maybe he hides from time to time to keep safe from his brother or the wild animals sharing the lonely territory. For sure he is afraid and full of questions. Does he regret the theft of the blessing? Does he feel guilty? Or bitter? Does he blame his brother for the situation he is in or does he realize that he has made a big mistake? We are aware of the fact that God was with him on that journey but if I were him I would go through many doubts and fears: What does God think of me now? Does his blessing really count, now that I've stolen it and not really earned it? Will God reject me?

How often have you had such thoughts in your life? Isn't it often that way that we hardly dare to turn to God if we feel something has gone terribly wrong in our lives?

How many of us have reacted to times of crisis and despair by running off just as Jacob is doing it. Let us keep the image of him fleeing in our heads and turn to our own lives for a moment.

Are we on the run?

What are we escaping from?

What do we need to leave behind?

Are we just running to get away or do we have a clear new destination?

A new relationship perhaps? A new job? A new home to settle in? A new lifestyle to aim at?

How far along are we on the journey? Are we close to arriving or do we have a long stretch ahead of us? Are we aware of the fact that God is always a step ahead, providing a path for our feet?

I imagine Jacob to be so full of fear and loneliness, trying so hard to cope and endure that he doesn't notice God's presence at first. He continues his race until he reaches the point of exhaustion, the limit that shows him that he can't keep up that speed. Let us meet up with Jacob at this point of the story where his strength comes to an end and he is most vulnerable, most threatened and for sure full of fear.

Wouldn't we expect Jacob to have a very restless sleep? A sleep interrupted by nightmares and a very sore back, after all he is lying on the hard floor, with a rock as a pillow and only the stars above him...

But he isn't tossing and turning in his sleep. He doesn't see the furious face of his brother nor does he hear his voice screaming: „I will kill you!“ Jacob sleeps peacefully, maybe already realizing that God is very near that moment.

Let us take a look at the Bible text telling about Jacob's special dream and the message he receives from God.

„And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: „I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, 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 of which I have spoken to you.“

This dream, this event of heaven opening up and touching the earth, marks a turning point in Jacob's story. All of his doubts and fears are released that very minute in which God appears to him in person. In this moment he realizes that there is a connection between heaven and earth. A connection between him and God, symbolized in the story by the ladder. And as so many times in the Bible, this event takes place at a time at which we wouldn't expect it. Jacob surely couldn't have. He is facing the consequences of his guilt and failure. Facing the hatred that it has caused. The world is turning its back on him. And then God appears with one of the greatest promises we can find in

the Bible: „I am with you!“, God says. „I will keep you. I will guide you. I will not leave you!“

I am with you.

I will keep you.

I will guide you.

I will not leave you.

Is there not a great longing in us to hear those words as well? How often do we wish, our partner, a family member or friend would say these words of assurance to us. And how often are we not aware of the fact that God speaks these words to us, too, any time we need it ... daytime or night... when we are guilty or when we have done a good deed. When we are in company or alone... strong or weak... We just need to listen. Make space for his ladder and the crowds of angels in our busy lives and throughout our stressful journeys.

There is a beautiful German song that we sang on the childrens' retreat. It tells about situations in which heaven and earth meet. Situations in which every one of us becomes one of God's messengers, making the gap between heaven and earth a little smaller.

The song suggests that heaven and earth touch in the moment in which people change their attitudes. In which human angels help and support each other. Act out of love, not out of hatred. And in which these angels become messengers of peace.

That's all very well but how does that fit to the story of Jacob? He is surely not a human angel. Why does the door to heaven open for him? Isn't that most unfair and annoying?

Of course our sense of justice struggles with the fact that Jacob just gets away with his bad conduct. That he is encouraged by God to continue the path that he has chosen. But thank goodness God is not self-righteous but rather merciful and forgiving. And it is the fact that God appears to a man full of failure that gives us the greatest hope. Jacob is not a superhero. He is not a figure without human mistakes and afflictions. No. With his own actions Jacob has called God's whole promise to Abraham in question. But God doesn't let him down. He is faithful and just carries on the plan that he has always had for him.

Isn't that enough of a promise that God sticks with us to the very end, too? Doesn't it give us the assurance that God knows exactly where our path should lead us? And doesn't it give us the peace to stop our race and our escape every now and then, knowing that God is closest when we are weak and frightened?

Jacob reacts to this lifeturning experience by building a stone altar at this special place named Bethel which is translated with „House of God“. He makes this ordinary place a holy place... the place where heaven and earth touch. Many other stones will be set upon this first one and very much later there will be a temple standing on that holy ground. But Jacob's story isn't to an end. Actually his journey with a clearer destination starts out from here.

His problems with his brother aren't solved. Nor have the wilderness and his raging brother become less dangerous. But Jacob is no longer on the run. His essential aim is not to leave his past behind but to rather look out for the future that God has promised him. He has a very rocky path ahead of him. There will be more betrayal on the wayside- by him and by others. He will have to work very hard to finally get the wife he wants to have. And probably he knows all along that he will have to face his brother one fine day. He needs more than 14 years of struggling, maturing, finding a wife and grounding a family before he returns to his home and faces his brother. 14 years of coming to terms with what he has done. What is expected of him. And what he wants for his life.

The reconciliation with his brother is the very end of this episode and works out better than Jacob might have dreamed. But before he can come to peace with his life and the blessing he has stolen, there has to be another encounter with God. This second time he meets God and speaks to him is not as peaceful as the first one. There is no starry night, no ladder with angels and it doesn't begin with words of comfort and healing. It is actually quite a fight that takes place at the little river Jabbok. In the Bible text we are told that „a man“ wrestles with him. There is no specific mention of this being God. All we find out is that it is a dark figure, that they fight openly and don't let go of each other until the sun rises.

„I will not let you go until you bless me!“ Those are Jacob's words. And in these words lie 14 years of fleeing, suffering and struggling. Jacob doesn't want to run away any longer. He doesn't want to wait, to hide and be blessed with a blessing meant for someone else. He has faced his failures and has composed his own dreams.

God asks him what his name is. And Jacob has to reveal his identity. The time of betrayal and hiding is over. The time of reflection and truth has come. And Jacob receives the blessing from God for the second time.

Jacob has been blessed. Jacob has been comforted. He has fought a battle with God and with himself. He has found his holy places and is aware of God's presence. And he is at peace... at this very moment. Let us leave him behind here and concentrate on our own journeys, our struggle for peace and the longing to feel God's presence.

Maybe you belong to those people whose lives just flow along evenly and who can't identify with Jacob. But more likely you have experienced some of the turbulences, the struggle and the unrest that Jacob had to overcome. Maybe you have silently debated with God about this or that. And maybe you have a longing for quietness, calmness and rest just as Jacob did. What we all have in common is the desire to experience God, to be close to him and communicate with him. The story of Jacob shows us that all of this is possible at all times. In every stage of our life. In every state of mind. In any holy place that we chose to meet him. He is right there with arms wide open, waiting to bless us and comfort us. Ready to fight with and for us but also to take us in his arms and hold us until the night passes. Eager for us to call upon his faithfulness and search for those places and those occasions where heaven touches earth.

We don't need to set off to Bethel to find the house of God. We needn't have been at the shores of Jabbok to see God in the face. The stones above which heaven opens itself lie on our way, waiting to be used as a cushion for our own dreams. They just need to be found and passed on. Today. Tomorrow and in the days and weeks to come. May God bless you on your journey.
Amen