

You Can Run But You Can't Hide

July 9, 2017 Genesis 28 :10 -19 Pastor Roger Barkley

Maybe you've heard someone say something like this: "I gave up on the Bible because I think that God loves everyone, but the Bible is all about God only caring about one particular group or tribe."

It's possible to read a lot of the texts that way, but there is so much more going on in those pages.

For example, there's a little hidden gem - it's only four verses long – that's buried in the middle of the Abraham narrative we've been following for the past couple of weeks.

It happens sometime after his nephew Lot had settled east of the Dead Sea.

There had been an invasion by some neighboring kings who looted the cities of Sodom, Zoar and Gomorrah and carried away some of their residents, including Lot.

When Abraham got wind of this, he gathered a band of 318 trained fighters and rescued Lot and returned the loot that had been pillaged.

As Abraham was returning home, he was approached by someone we'd not met, and whom we will never hear from again.

Genesis 14:18-20 *And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine;*

By the way, Salem most likely was a small town upon which Jerusalem was later built.

Now pay attention here:

He (that's King Melchizedek) was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said,

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"*

And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

Giving a tithe to this priest means that Abraham recognized his legitimacy, but who was this guy with the weird name?

We've spent a fair amount of time in recent weeks talking about the religions and culture of this period in the Ancient Near East.

We've seen how their belief system was built around a pantheon of gods and goddesses who were mostly indifferent - or even hostile - to humans, and how, over time, humans developed a system of sacrifices to win their favor.

And there were also local deities who might watch over you while you were within their territory.

But as we've read along through Genesis, our assumption has been that the God who called Abram from his safe, secure and familiar home in northern Mesopotamia and promised to make him the father of a great nation was the one, true God.

In other words, we're assuming that other people may have sacrificed to various deities, but those were all false gods, and the people just didn't know it.

Now, we get it that Abraham was just thinking that his god was one of many gods, but for some reason acting as his benefactor.

Monotheism would not be recognized for many centuries, but we, the readers of the Bible, have the inside story.

We know that's its just a matter of time before it's revealed that there's only one true God, and He's the one who is leading Abraham whether Abraham knew it or not.

Everybody else?

They're on the wrong track, worshiping false gods.

But then this priest of the Most High God comes out of left field and crosses paths with Abraham.

Apparently, he's been going about his priestly business totally apart from the biblical narrative we're following.

You'd think that in Old Testament tradition that a person of such importance would be introduced with a lengthy genealogy to give him credentials and credibility.

But no ... he just appears.

In the Ancient Near East, names carried great significance, and his name literally means "My God is Righteousness".

So, My God is Righteousness, Creator of heaven and earth, blesses Abraham, who immediately recognizes his status as the priest of the Most High God, after which this guy disappears from the Biblical narrative.

The first couple of times I read this passage I scratched my head and wondered who the heck he was, but it's just a couple of verses dropped into the middle of the story, so I just moved on.

But there is something really big happening here.

What's happening is that while we've been following Abraham on his pilgrimage, God was already present and at work there in Canaan.

God was already at work among different people, before Abraham arrived on the scene.

A few decades after Jesus' crucifixion, the author of the book of Hebrews returned to this mysterious passage in Genesis 14 and claimed that Jesus came from the priestly lineage of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 5:10 (*Jesus*) *having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

What?

Jesus' priestly ordination is linked to someone outside of our Abraham, Isaac and Jacob heritage?

By the way, remember how Melchizedek brought bread and wine to Abraham?

Does that ring any bells about Jesus' Last Supper?

Maybe you know someone who doesn't go to church, maybe they've rejected some of the beliefs you hold dear, yet they seem to carry a wisdom or a peace that is beyond them.

Or maybe you know someone from outside the institutions you hold as sacred who's been healed of some disease or anguish in a way that seems miraculous.

Or maybe you know someone whose life seems more aligned with the values espoused by Jesus than some of the people who attend church every week.

Well, right here, early in the Bible, we're told that God also works outside our traditions.

Now, I believe that Jesus is the fullest self-revelation of God, and we grow closest to God through our discipleship with Jesus.

But I also know that if you keep your heart open, you may find yourself crossing paths with someone who's never stepped foot in a church or read a page of the Bible who brings a blessing for you.

God comes to us in unexpected ways, through unexpected people and in unexpected places ... and we sometimes only half get it.

I'm thinking of Jacob.

Now, we're going to fast forward two generations from Abraham.

Before he dies, Abraham passes the blessing he received from God to Isaac, who had a relatively uneventful life.

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, who begin their lives of conflict while still in the womb of their mother, Rebekah.

Esau is the eldest son and the favorite of his father because he's a hunter and a man's man, whereas Jacob is a quiet young man who is happy to hang around home, and so becomes the favorite of his mother.

In their culture, the eldest son was supposed to receive the blessing of the father and a lion's share of the inheritance.

But Jacob and Rebekah conspire to cheat Esau out of his birthright and his dying father's blessing, which results in Jacob having to flee for his life from his enraged brother, leaving behind all the flocks, tents and servants he deceptively inherited.

Genesis 28:10-11 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set.

Remember Haran?

That's back in northern Mesopotamia where his grandfather, Abraham, began this whole journey, so Jacob's treachery could undo everything the family had achieved.

Now Jacob is running from his family as a fugitive, which in his culture essentially made him a non-person.

Notice that, at first, scripture did not even give this place where Jacob stopped for the night a name – it's a random, non-place chosen only because of nightfall.

So, Jacob has become a non-person in a non-place, a vagabond somewhere between a conflicted past and an uncertain future.

Under the stars, Jacob passes from consciousness that was filled with loneliness, dread and guilt ... and it is here, in this vulnerable state, that God comes to him.

His dream is not a dark review of his shameful past but an alternative future where God is close, personal, and engaged.

In the dream, Jacob sees God's messengers passing back and forth between heaven and earth.

Genesis 28:12 *And he dreamed that 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.*

Most likely, Jacob was envisioning something like a ziggurat, those massive earth and brick mounds with steps carved into the sides that were intended to rise to the heavens.

Then, in the most unlikely of places and circumstance, God reassures Jacob:

Genesis 28:15 *“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.”*

Jacob’s dream is both awe inspiring and personal.

Though unseen and unrecognized, God had been with Jacob all along, and God seeks to reassure Jacob that he need not fear because God will remain with him always.

We study the Bible, and we come to church each week so that we learn to recognize God.

You see, the God we encounter here in worship is the same God who met Abram and Sarai in their barrenness, and who met Jacob in his suffering, and who will meet you in your troubled marriage, your discouraging search for a new job, or your scary medical diagnosis.

Genesis 28:16 *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”*

Jacobs gets it half right.

God is in this place ... but not *just* in this place.

Genesis 28:17 says that after saying that, Jacob was afraid, which is different from having “fear of the Lord” ... which essentially means awe of the God, humility before God.

To be afraid in Hebrew lingo is a heads-up that the person got something wrong, like after Jacob’s grandmother laughed at God, the text says she was then afraid.

Then Jacob continues, Genesis 28:17b *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; the gate to heaven.”*

And the first thing in the morning he constructed a stone pillar to pinpoint where heaven came to earth, and he named the place Bethel, which means “house of God”.

Human instinct is to limit God to a place, but then we miss all the ways God meets us along the way.

People miss how God is present everywhere, that we become especially open and aware in our suffering and humility as Jacob was here.

Then, surprise, surprise, the place we've designated as sacred becomes exclusionary.

Centuries later, after King Solomon's death, the north of Israel rebelled, set-up their own kingdom, and then made Bethel a center for worship to compete with Jerusalem.

What followed was generations of condemning one another's temples – my place where God appeared is better than your place.

They turned a place where God promised to be with us everywhere and always into a place you have to go to, a place where the officials control who gets to see God.

In the Celtic tradition people also build stone pillars – they're called cairns – to memorialize a place where they encountered God, and in their areas, you see these cairns all over the place.

The Celts have gotten good at seeing God everywhere.

I can believe that Jesus is the fullest self-revelation of God.

I can believe that Jesus is my Lord and Savior while still knowing that God is at work throughout the world ... meeting people wherever they're at, in whatever culture they live, and within whatever beliefs they've inherited.

From King Melchizedek to Jacob's dream, the Bible itself tells us that God's love for His people is so great that it transcends time, culture and even religion.