

“Grace is on the move”  
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Poor Jacob. It wasn't supposed to be like this. A second's difference, and he would have been the first born son. He would have been the one his dad loved the most, the one people told heroic stories about. He would have gotten the inheritance. Instead, his twin brother Esau was born first—Esau who was always taller, always stronger, always the better hunter, always the favored son. Favored by everyone except their mother. She loved Jacob. So the two of them hatched a plan fitting of Jacob's name, which in Hebrew means “schemer.”

Jacob tricked his half-starving brother into selling his birthright in exchange for some stew. Then, Jacob deceived his father by pretending to be Esau and stealing the blessing that was meant for his brother. And for a brief moment, Jacob had everything he wanted. But it all fell apart when Esau discovered what Jacob had done.

When our story begins this morning, Jacob is on the run, fleeing from his brother, who has sworn to kill him in revenge. He's lost everything and everyone he ever knew and loved. He's alone, and he's scared. For once in his life, he has no clear plan. The future is uncertain. He has lived only for himself, and now he's all he's got.

He doesn't even have a god to pray to. Up until now, the Lord has always been his dad's God, not his. He's never said, “my God”; it's always been “your God” (Gen. 27:20).

This is the same man who will later shout to the heavens that he is not worthy of God's love (Gen. 32:10). Not worthy of anything but this stone under his head.

How many of us have been right where Jacob is? How many of us are there right now, convinced that we're alone and not worthy of love? We plan, and we plan, and we plan, and still, life ends up all wrong. We get hurt. We hurt others.

But there's one thing Jacob can still do. It's the one thing we all can do, no matter how bad life gets. Jacob dreams. Amid fitful sleep, he dreams. And in that dream, he sees hope. He sees a ladder extending all the way from earth to heaven. On this ladder are God's messengers, angels. They're on the move too. But unlike him, they move with purpose. They live for something bigger than themselves; they carry a message that others need. A message Jacob needs.

God is with him. God is with this ordinary, crummy person in this ordinary, crummy place. God never says a word of rebuke. God just smiles and makes one unconditional promise after another. God tells Jacob that God doesn't belong only to his father Isaac; God is his too. God made him. God loves him. God will always be with him.

In this dream, God creates a future for Jacob. God takes this scheming thief and transforms him into a man blessed to bless others. God says to Jacob, “all the families of the earth shall be

blessed in you and in your offspring” (Gen. 28:14). They will be like dust blanketing the earth, a blessing meant, not just for the firstborn, not just sons, not just the righteous, but for everyone, for the prodigal sons and the orphans and the widows and the poor and every child that thinks they’re not worthy of love.

That word *dust* in Hebrew can also mean topsoil, the rich layer of earth that feeds life. In blessing Jacob, God has given him a purpose. This purpose isn’t like any of the purposes he’s had before. This purpose isn’t to make him powerful. It’s to serve others.

God makes Jacob an angel, a living message from heaven to earth of God’s grace.

Worthy or not, God chose Jacob. God chooses us. And there is no place in our worship life where this choice is clearer than in baptism.

In baptism, we stumble, as Jacob once did, into a thin place, where heaven and earth touch, where all you need do is reach out your hand and feel God. In this place where we feel so alone and afraid, God takes ordinary people and ordinary water and makes them spectacular. There is no rebuke, only the message that God made us. God loves us. God will always be with us.

In baptism, God rips open the heavens and pulls down a gift. It is the gift of belonging to an ancient and blessed family, a communion of saints—the promise that their God is our God. And it is the gift of a future. A future, though, that is not just for us. We, like Jacob, are to be made into angels, living blessings of God’s grace. We are to be the rich, black earth in which others grow and find life.

I can almost hear the amazement and glee in Jacob’s voice as he wakes and announces this to the world. A message from heaven: I am loved, and so are you.

Tom Walker, a Presbyterian pastor in Florida, remembers when he stumbled across that message. He was going through his mother’s closet when he discovered an old, forgotten shoebox. As he opened it, letters poured out into his lap, “recording four years of correspondence between [his] parents and an adoption agency.”

Tom had known that he was adopted. But what he hadn’t known, what he had never fully grasped until this moment, was just how badly his parents had wanted him. He writes, “Four years before I was ever born, my parents were hard at work preparing a place for me. Even before I received my name, before I was baptized in our small Presbyterian church, before I could respond with the words ‘I love you,’ my parents cared for me. In that shoebox was a history of love and grace that preceded any action on my part.”

Just as Tom was adopted by his parents, we are all adopted by God through baptism. We are made God’s children. Tom likes to think that God has shoeboxes for us all. And I think he’s right.

God had a shoebox for Jacob. God has one for Liam, who will be baptized today. And God has one for you too. In it is a history of love and grace, a story of God's longing for you, photos of the future God wants for you.

We, like Jacob, may find ourselves in deserts, refugees fleeing our past, uncertain of our future. We may find that life isn't going as planned.

And then we remember our baptism. We pull out this shoebox and see for ourselves how much God wants us. We see that a future is still possible.

I want you, each of you, to take some time today to open that shoebox, to see yourself through the eyes of One who loves you, who fought for you tooth and nail and still does, who has laid out a future for you, a purpose. I want you to carry this shoebox, this memory of your baptism, with you, always. It is like the stone that Jacob sets up as a pillar, poured over with oil, a reminder of God's presence and promise.

A shoebox of love, of grace on the move. **Amen.**