Title: Bereft to Blessed

Main Text: Genesis 28:10-22

Worship Liturgy Short Form Notes: Call to Worship (O Lord How Majestic is your name in all the earth!), Confession inspired by Psalm 8 (god of creation is mindful of us and we confess we are not so mindful of him), Assurance -- Hebrews 2:9, 16-18 (Jesus helps all who are tempted, helps all of Jacob’s descendants)

Speaker: Melissa Burmaster

Location/Date : CrossPoint CRC Tilsonburg, Aug 10

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwPU3gZ7eP8>

-- 50:40 - 1:33

\*\* Note: Genesis 28:10-22 has been read prior to the sermon.

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| Opening - Introduction |

(SLIDE 1 - TITLE SLIDE) Jacob has only just got a big win - the family blessing from Isaac! And suddenly, he has been sent out the door to Haran. He is alone, no additional help, no significant wealth and his reputation is sunk. *Despite a family blessing from Isaac -- he is now looking more bereft than blessed.* On the journey of life, we all want to look up to the heavens and know that **God is with us**. **Yet,** our grasp on that can just **slip through our fingers** and some of the unquestionable becomes questioned. In the bereftness of life, when we get real with God and he gets real with us, Jacob’s life shows us there is a greater blessing - **one that surpasses the wildest of dreams.**

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| Page 1 Jacob the Blessed is Bereft |

As Jacob tucks himself in for the night, his mind tries to shut down, **but how can it?** So much has happened in the last short while. Jacob has quite the backstory and its unsettling.

(SLIDE 2) First off, Jacob is in an unresolvable relationship with his twin brother Esau. **Jacob has just stolen** the family blessing from Esau. **To Esau’s dismay,** there is no undoing the giving away of the family blessing to Jacob. **Previous to that, Jacob had stolen Esau’s birthright** over a measly bowl of stew. **This has made** Esau inconsolable and he wants to take revenge by killing Jacob. **Jacob is leaving home bereft of a relationship with his closest sibling.**

(SLIDE 3) **Jacob’s relationship with his father isn’t the best either.** In this family system, Issac has always loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. **When Jacob stole** the family blessing, he deceived his father. So, trust has been lost there. Then Isaac sends Jacob out without a servant to support him and without funds to bring back the wife right away.That might seem like nothing to blow smoke at, **Isaac’s father** sent a servant with ten camels to get a wife for him. **To be noted**, Isaac is not giving Jacob any additional help!

But, then right before he takes off on the journey there is the prayer. Isaac prays well for God to bless Jacob, increase his numbers to a large community, and position him to come back to take possession of the land. However, it will take years for that to materialize. Isaac is actually praying for something that will keep Jacob away for a good long time. (SLIDE 5)Given Jacob’s unfavoured status, the loss of trust, the lack of financial support for the journey and the hint to stay away, it is reasonable to suggest there is some real tension between father and son. So, **Jacob is leaving home bereft of his father’s full delight in him.**

(SLIDE 4) **With all that noise going with his family**, Jacob’s reputation amongst the community is also ruined. **Who can go around stealing birth rights** and blessings from one’s brother and not have people questioning your ***trustworthiness*? Who can go around deceiving one’s father to get a blessing** and not have people looking at you as a ***dishonourable son?*** Jacob’s reputation among Isaac’s servants and the general household is damaged. **Despite that significant family blessing, Jacob is relationally bereft with respect to his community, his father and his brother.**

(SLIDE 6)**Rolling over to his other side to get more comfortable, the road ahead is ALSO concerning for Jacob.** He has to know that this adventure is not his strong suit. It is a 500 mile journey to Uncle Laban’s. At 20 miles per day, it will take at least a month. There is no take out on route. He can’t hunt… it was Esau that was in the wild not him. Remember too, it was Rebekah’s servant that got the wild game for the blessing meal between Isaac & Jacob. When walking past the tents of home, Isaac’s servants were likely to be making bets whether Jacob would arrive alive in Haran.

*(Include ??... gauge if there are young kids / Young Adult population in the congregation)* This would be a comical scenario in any modern remake. Jacob meets JOE PRO wilderness *“*...heading to Paddam Aram,... I’ve heard it’s nice there, but seriously,... that is a long way to go and it’s bulking season,... no smoothie bar on the way there.Lentil stew won’t get you there, you need real protein -(SLIDE 7) best take down a cow. Not a hunter, … if you can find the Costco in Damascus, get some protein powder…. (SLIDE 8) have you tried ***YA-whey YA-go bro?****” Just saying --* **Jacob has serious work** ahead learning to survive on his own!

(SLIDE 9) Even if he makes it to Uncle Laban’s, his mother has been gone a long time. **What is his Uncle** like now? Is he a man that keeps his word or not? Will he even have a daughter to offer for marriage? Jacob is bereft of confidence about what lies ahead. **Whether it means looking behind or looking ahead, Jacob is surrounded with reasons to feel bereft.**

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| Page 2 -- Trouble in our world - we become bereft and that looks like? |

(SLIDE 10)**We may not be in Jacob's shoes, but we have felt bereftness in life, whether we are young or old.** (SLIDE 11)*To be bereft means to be deprived, lacking, or to be sad and lonely, especially after the loss of someone or something.* Being bereft comes on the other side of having something taken away, having a security that evaporates, having ideas of the future dissolve… and often it just suddenly slips away - it brings up so many other feelings too.

(SLIDE 11)**We might suddenly** have a medical mystery and physical illness has taken over. ***We have pain that no prayer takes away. We are discouraged***

**We are suddenly out of work** -- We felt secure in our job, but something suddenly changed. ***We are in shock.***

**We are suddenly strapped for funds** - an investment went sour, the crop season wasn’t sufficient ***again***, a barn needs to be rebuilt, a car breaks down… ***Despite frugality we are financially fragile.***

**We are suddenly unravelling** -- we held things together for so long. Now buried trauma has been activated. ***We are very vulnerable***.

**We are suddenly alone** -- a spouse died; a relationship dissolved; we had plans to do so much together yet. ***We are alone and grieving.***

**The more effort invested and hopes built into someone or something makes sudden bereftness run deeper.** Whatever our initiative and abilities have brought our way,.... it’s up in the air now. ***We have lost confidence and we are so tired.***

**Being a Christian doesn’t make us immune to feeling a bereftness in life.** Sometimes we’ve been pushedto trust Godin new ways which bring out particular vulnerabilities. BUT, sometimes we are too Christian to feel the pain,… it takes time to stop being brave; to stop faking it. So then, we may be having trouble sleeping at night. We look up to a dark night sky and say to ourselves, “Where are you God? Are you really mindful of me right now as I sit in this…?” Bereftness comes into our lives in a myriad of ways and it is notorious for coming suddenly upon us.

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| Page 3 - God initiates : he blesses the bereft with personal relationship |

(SLIDE 13)**Turning over on the rocky surface, Jacob did fall asleep and the tossing and turning gave way to a blessing for a truly bereft soul.** God has been very mindful of Jacob; he takes divine initiative to speak to Jacob in a very elaborate dream.

Genesis 28 tells us that Jacob becomes aware of a ladder that reaches from the earth to the heavens above. Angels are ascending and descending on it and the LORD is at the very top. Angels are known to be dispatch agents of God who speak to individuals. But, not this time. Only the Lord is speaking and **directly** to Jacob with *no intermediary*.

God outlines multiple layers of blessing for Jacob - such as provision, descendants and purpose. Jacob will be given the land, his family will become as numerous as the dust of the earth, and they will bless all the peoples on earth. So far, this sounds really good - what more could you want, right? But, then comes the final blessing. The Lord says to him “I am with you, … I will watch over you,... wherever you go, … I will bring you back to this land,... I will not leave you till I have finished what I started.”

Let’s consider that carefully because that is quite different from the previous blessings. The last blessing - to be with him, with him wherever he goes and watch over him -- is a promise of perpetual, consistent connection in the form of a relationship. God has already said to Jacob ***…*** I will be your father, just like I was a father to your father and Abraham. This is a covenant being sustained from generation to generation for sure! But, it is not just a contract, it is not just business, it is personal. This covenant has a personal relationship stamped all over it. For someone dying for a father’s genuine affection,... that had to hit a sore spot.

(SLIDE 14) **As God initiates this blessing of relationship with Jacob, just notice the tremendous effect it has.** Jacob wakes up saying “Surely, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!” The opening word catches our attention -- (SLIDE 15)“Surely”,... when that is used in our language the intent of the word expresses *a very firm belief in what one is saying - that it is true and it would be shocking to doubt it as such***.** This meaning is consistent with the original language, but it is more weighty in this context. ***Surely*** is a verbal pivot for JACOB -- a move from uncertainty to conviction, from assumption to revelation about God. Before the dream, Jacob didn't know God was in the place he was at -- -- but now he is saying “**Surely, the LORD was in this place -- and *he is very much knows it*!”**

(SLIDE 16) This ladder dream has done something incredible. It has served to visualize for Jacob God’s initiative for a personal relationship with him - a relationship to be marked by promises to be with him consistently; to care for him and not forsake him on this journey. So, God is not just doing his job to keep a covenant with people - like it is a proper deal to keep. God is ***also doing*** all that he can to love his people and have a relationship with them.

The New Testament highlights a ladder story that demonstrates God’s desire for a relationship with other descendants of Abraham. In the book of John, Nathanael is taken by friend Philip to see Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael has a sudden revelation that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel (John 1:50) Jesus responds to his belief in him saying (SLIDE 17) “ **You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? ….You shall see greater things than that,... I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:50-51)**.

Again there are angels moving up and down, but not on a ladder but on the Son of Man this time. This time it is not a ladder mentioned, but the Son of Man. As the swap is made, what Jesus was “saying/implying” to all present is, *I am the ladder that reaches from earth to the heavens, I was the ladder for Jacob who believed in God then, and I am the ladder for you now as you believe in me!* As Nathaniel believes in Christ, he experiences the same personal relationship connection that Jacob had back then. See the scope **of that ladder extends from Jacob and now it reaches to the descendants of Jacob.**

(SLIDE 19) Other New Testament writers fill out more about the “**how”, “for whom”** **and “when”** Jesus is being a *ladder connecting people to God*. Looking to Hebrews, **Jesus is being a ladder when** it says in Hebrews 2:16-17 says, *“***For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”** Jesus serves as a ladder in this way -- having become like man in every way to be able to atone for sin that overcomes our separation from God.

(SLIDE 21) In Paul’s writings, he states **for whom** Jesus will be a ladder. In **Romans 10: 11-13 “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*.*”** Jesus blesses all, everyone - all everyone -- who calls on his name. Jesus serves as a ladder by -- richly blessing all who call on his name granting them salvation.

(SLIDE 22) Jesus is a ladder **when we most need it too.** Scripture tells us that “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8),” paying the debt for our sin. That is a true blessing for all of us who are caught up in bereftness of our own sin and trouble, … isn’t that beyond our wildest dreams and imagination? You see,... **God has taken initiative in Jesus** to set up a ladder that overcomes our separation from God, whereby sin is atoned for through Christ death, granting us forgiveness and now all who call on his name and believe in him may be saved. That is an amazing blessing we can all experience.

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| Page 4 Theme sentence – Hope - When God initiates with our bereft souls in our daily life |

**Incredible as that is, what does God’s initiative to make Jesus, our ladder, look like in real life here and now?**  *Anyone who is* ***baptized in Christ*** *has already experienced* God’s initiative towards them, but you might not remember it personally. It happened and God was extending his grace to you in that sacrament. If you had parents taking you to Sunday School, you got knowledge from teachers that Jesus loves you ( the Sunday school teachers are angels of God in my opinion 🙂). That being what it is,... catching the sense that Jesus is speaking to you and that a ladder has been extended to you personally can be a very different experience. When theoretical becomes actual, when what you know in your head is being felt in your heart as being true! This was how it was for Jacob - previously he knew of God through his parents, but under the stars he came to ***surely know God*** in a personal way which he had never previously experienced.

Here are some practical thoughts to share when it comes to God initiating with us. (Slide 23) **#1 God initiates and it doesn’t depend on one’s righteousness and goodness.** Jacob was a real stinker! There is no record of him being sorry to Esau for a very long time. Yet, a ladder (that is Jesus) connects Jacob to God all the same! The Lord does this not because Jacob is good, but because He is merciful. As mentioned before,.. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). We can trust that God reaches towards us in Jesus Christ not because we are doing things right, but because God is merciful - full stop.

**(SLIDE 25) #2 In our deepest struggles, God is most near to us.** You might recall that David wrote in Psalm 34:18 "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*.” David was a man speaking from bereftness rising from guilt over his affair with Batheseba. He was intensely aware of the pain he had caused in covering that up. David’s painful sorrow brought him to repentance and he learned that God was faithful to meet a crushed spirit with mercy. As CS Lewis wrote “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciousness and screams to us in our pain.” At the worst times of life, stay open for God even if you want to close down. Keep praying, keep worshiping, keep reading, keep going to church. Just keep going!

**(Slide 27)Point #3 While God takes initiative, he supports us taking agency to do the same.** We are encouraged to reach up when the ladder doesn’t seem to be there. Jeremiah 29:13 says, “...*we will find him if we are seeking him with our whole heart.”* The Message translation speaks plainly -- [**“When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.”(Jeremiah 29:13-14)**](https://www.bible.com/bible/97/JER.29.13.MSG) God has been around long enough to know when people are seeking him and still holding their own agendas. When you are genuinely seeking God, he will bless your effort and you will find him.

**(Slide 29) Finally, #4 God's divine initiative activates staying power within us though we still have some challenges.**  For Jacob, the blessing of God with him helped him in the face of being tricked into marrying one girl and having to wait another 7 years for the wife he really wanted. Despite his frustrations, he doesn’t go back to his old ways to out do Laban. Jacob still has trouble getting away from Laban and worries about meeting up with Esau again. What do we see Jacob do? Jacob is willing to wrestle with God and push back for blessings promised even when things are going sideways in his life. Jacob stays true to the VOW that he made which was at the end of the passage we read today -- that if God will be with him, give him clothing, watch over him wherever he goes and bring him back home, then God would be his God. He stays strong and doesn’t go back on his VOW from this point forward.

**But, if you are like me, my staying power is boosted when I get reminders from God along the way.** When I returned to seminary in 2018, I was like Abraham who started off on a journey not knowing where I was going. All I knew was that something wasn’t sitting just right with the school teaching profession. (Slide 30) I remember praying about half way through my master’s program. “I don’t know where you are taking me but I trust in you” I wrote that on a post-it note and left it on my mirror for a good long time. Taking a step of faith, I applied and got into the EPMC at Calvin Seminary,... (Slide 31 & 32) Then suddenly, I had an opportunity to do a sabbatical coverage for Sara DeMoor in Campus Ministry. Then suddenly, Brian Bork was leaving his role and here I am at Waterloo Campus Ministry. For me, I was bereft because I had a sense of calling but I didn’t know where it was going and that was unnerving for me. The blessings came after my obedience in taking the steps forward and keeping my vow to trust him.

When I celebrated the new role with my River City Church community, there was a note from one of my friends that had a message that stood out. Of course, it’s not the only message God has given me about the journey. She wrote (Slide 33) “Dear Melissa, you’ve got this. Well actually God’s got this, but God’s got you,... so you’re good! Enjoy your new adventure!” Those words… God got this - God’s got you, are a good reminder that *God is with me, wherever I go - I’m good*. **That is a message to not let slip through my fingers, thank you Jesus for the reminder!**

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| Conclusion - |

(SLIDE 34) In close, God initiated with Jacob and took him from bereft to truly blessed, it changed his way of life. The ladder in that dream brought Jacob into a personal relationship with God back then. And that ladder is the same ladder that is extended to you today. Jesus has come to help us find our way back to God - it is not a casual relationship, but a consistent relationship where he wants to watch over us wherever we go. If that is something that you are interested in doing today, being re-connected with God through Jesus, allowing Jesus to be the ladder for you, I would love to have a conversation with you. I imagine that many here already know Jesus as their ladder, my encouragement is this: many things will slip through our fingers over our lifetimes, **BUT** we need only hold firmly and believe in Jesus -- then we too shall see angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man - that’s enough to take bereftness to blessing beyond anyone’s wildest dreams.