

My Place in Line
Genesis 35, 2 Timothy 1:3-10
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
August 27, 2006
Pastor Dave Carver

Genesis 35 is a chapter filled with transitions...lots of death, and a birth...and it ends with two old men leaning on their shovels as they bury their father. I couldn't get that image out of my head as I contemplated this scripture, and so this message is a bit of imaginative writing dealing with the ways that Jacob/Israel and Esau have been changed by their encounters with the Lord.

Jacob up front with shovel, Esau coming down aisle with shovel...

J: Esau? Esau? Hey, old man, is that you? I was starting to wonder if you'd ever get here.

E: You, impatient? That's a little ironic, don't you think? I mean, All these years, I'm the one who has the reputation for rushing into things, for not thinking ahead. **Pause** What has it been, brother – ten years? Fifteen?

J: If I count right, it's been more like twenty since I crossed over the fords of the Jabbok and you were there to meet me. Can it have been that long ago?

E: Look, you were the one who was good with numbers. If you say it was twenty years, Jacob, I'll say that it was twenty years.

J: Do me a favor, will you? Don't call me Jacob.

E: Uh, OK. Can you give me a clue, though? I mean, that is your name, little brother.

J: It was my name, all right? And I'm only your "little brother" by about twenty minutes and three inches.

E: So what do you go by these days, brother?

J: God – YAHWEH – met me the night before I ran into you years ago and told me that my name wasn't going to be "Jacob" anymore – instead of being called "trickster" or "grabber", I would be called "Israel" – "God protects". I've got to admit, it's taken some time to get used to. Do you know how when you're writing a check at the beginning of the year and you go to write the date, but you always write the old date?

E: I don't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about...

J: Well, what I mean is, I keep trying to think and act and pray like Israel, but sometimes it's just so much easier to be Jacob. It's hard to really live like it's all up to God, and not me, but I'm trying.

E: Whatever. I've always thought that you think WAY too much. **Pause. Look down and kick at shovel.** Well, let's get this hole filled in. We're not getting any younger, you know.

J: Yeah...the old man is finally dead. Somehow, it seemed like this day would never arrive.

E: Tell me about it. What was it, forty years ago? fifty? When you stole the blessing and high-tailed it out of here for old Laban's place? We thought the old coot was dead then, but he got better! He just kept on going and going.

J: I can't tell you how surprised I was when I got back and found out he was still alive. I was sure that he'd be dead and you'd be itching to do me in as soon as you got the chance.

E: Don't kid yourself – if I'd have had the chance right then, you wouldn't have lived another day. But the longer you were gone, and the older I got, and the richer I got (**laughs**), the less important settling the score with you seemed to be.

J: **Pause, reflect...**You know, Esau, it's not going to be all that long for us. Do you see all that room in this cave? We're next, you know. This life is passing by pretty quickly.

E: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, we're closer to the end than we are to the beginning, right?

J: You ain't kidding. It seems like I'm going to more funerals than anything else lately. Just this month we lost our nanny, Deborah, and then my favorite wife, Rachel, died. That was hard to take. Hard to take.

Both pause, shovel for a few moments.

E: So tell me, brother – how's that whole "promise" thing working out for you? I mean, it seemed so important to you when we were kids. What's it done for you lately? I did see something in the papers a couple of months back about a little disturbance down in Shechem. When I read the part about all the victims had been circumcised before they were killed, I about wet my robes. I knew it was you behind that one. Is that how you're keeping the promise?

J: **Look him straight in the eye** – I don't want to hear about that ever again. I'm not proud of what happened, and if I could change it, I would. I'm just so tired, Esau. I mean, when grandpa and dad talked about the promise, it seemed so real, so vibrant, so now. But more and more, it seems to me, that the promise is always on the way.

E: Again with the impatience. You really don't like to wait, do you?

J: No, that's not what I mean to say. I guess I mean, well, that there are some times when it seems to me that the waiting is what I'm here for. Like somehow YAHWEH is using this waiting to shape me – to shape us – into something else.

E: Hold onto your robe, there, buddy. You just said “us”. As I recall, you did everything you could to make sure that there was no “us” in the promise. Or have you forgotten?

J: I haven’t forgotten – I’ve learned. All those years ago, I thought that the promise was about me. I’d be rich, I’d be the father of a great nation, I’d be the blessing. But I’ve learned that the promise is bigger than me. I’m not going to see the promise fulfilled, I can tell you that. Neither will you – neither of us will, any more than Dad or Grandpa did.

E: So I was right all along, then, eh? The promise is no good. It’s empty.

J: No, that’s not what I mean at all. It’s more like God gave the promise to Abraham, who gave it to the old man. Now I’ve got it, and I’m just sort of holding it for the next generation.

E: So the promise is a baton in a relay race? You’re just working yourself silly for a few years until you die, and then it’s Junior’s problem? That’s some God you serve, Jac---I mean, Israel.

J: Look, I’m not saying that I understand it all. I’m not proud of everything I’ve done, and you should see what some of those kids of mine have done in my name. But that’s what I’m trying to say when I say that it’s bigger than me. I guess that I used to think that the promise belonged to me...now, I sort of think that I belong to it. I’m supposed to live it, and to share it, until either it all comes to pass or the boys are putting me into this hole.

Both dig a little more

E: Well, that about does it. I guess we can come out here later on with the kids and say a few words, huh? What do you think you’ll do now, Jac – Israel? He’s dead, and by rights the place is yours now. I suspect you’ll be wanting to move in soon...

J: Yeah, I thought it’d be good for the family for me to be here – this is as close to home as I’ve ever had. I guess I’ll just try to live according to the ways that YAHWEH asks. And I think that I’ll try to do a better job at teaching the kids that they not only *have* the promise, they *are* the promise.

E: Teaching the grandkids, you mean?

J: No, you see that little screecher over there? He’s mine. His name is Benjamin. I see big things for his future. All of ‘em – something’s going to happen. ***Pause...*** what about you? You’ll stay, won’t you?

E: Oh, come off it, Jacob. You don’t want me around –

J: No, Esau, really –

E: And besides, have you looked at my flocks? There’s no room for both of us. I was staying here out of respect for the old man. After mother died, he was just clueless. No, I’ve got an offer in on some property over in Seir – in the

hill country. That'll suit me just fine. I'll get out of your way. Besides, I'm not very into that "promise" mumbo-jumbo anyway.

J: It's not just a promise, Esau, it's...it's a way to live. It's a faith. I don't know why I think this, but I can't help but think that there's more to the story.

E: Whatever.

J: No, really – I think I really mean this when I say that it's good to be home.

E: Don't make me laugh.

J: What do you mean?

E: I mean you've been running your whole life. Look, if I were you, I wouldn't spend too many shekels on the landscaping. You don't seem to be able to stay in one place very long.

J: Yeah, that's a good point. You know, I'm not going to try to look ahead very far. I've decided that what I need to do is to learn from the people who have come before me and do my best to teach what I can to those who are behind me. And wait...

E: ...for the promise. Sheesh, what a boring old man you've turned out to be!

J: No, not boring – anything but boring. Listen, Esau...do you remember when we were just kids and you and dad thought that I was way too soft? Do you remember how he'd try to toughen me up?

E: With the camel?

J: Yeah, with the camel. He'd put me on top – no saddle, no rope, no nothing, and then he'd hit that camel as hard as he could, yelling and screaming until that beast took off like the devil himself was behind us. All I could do was to hold on. I was too scared to cry, too scared to shout. I knew that if I could just hold on that sooner or later the camel would get tired and I'd get to where I belonged, and when I did, mom would be there, and she'd make everything all right. That's what I feel like now, Esau – like the ride is going on and it's scary and fast, but somehow at the end of the day, YAHWEH will be there and we'll get things sorted out. I'm holding on to the promise as best I can. **Pause...** Look, we both know that this grave is where I'm going to end up. Between now and then, I'm just holding on, and I'm glad that the weight of the promise is mostly on God's shoulders, not mine.

E: Yeah, well, whatever. That's about all the "promise" talk I need for the next twenty years or so. Good luck with the camels, or whatever.

J: Wait, Esau. Stay, brother. Don't go yet. Come and meet the family again. Let me tell you the story again. Let me hold it up one more time. The promise, you know, it's not my promise. It's God's. And I'm pretty sure that if we hold it up just right, you'll be able to see your name on there somewhere. Come on – let's go have a little porridge for old time's sake.

Walk out together