

The Season of Pentecost: Ordinary Time and Extraordinary Promise

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The season of Pentecost is known as Ordinary Time in the liturgical year. This season is “ordinary” because unlike Advent and Lent, it is not moving toward the decisive events in the life and death of Jesus. The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus are lodged in other seasons, and the landscape of ordinary time contains no hints of such vivid moments. The season of Pentecost stretches before us, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, each week as “ordinary” as the last. It is the very ordinariness of this season that makes it so crucial in the life of the church, however, because it is the time when week after week, day after day, we must live out our “ordinary” struggles as people of the gospel. The grace of God made known to us in the drama of Advent and Lent, Christmas and Easter propels us forward into ordinary time. The hope of the Christmas birth, the suffering of the Passion, and the victory of Easter have redefined our very identities. We have been reborn as a people of the gospel, and in ordinary time we are called to claim the new lives that have been given us by God through Jesus.

The challenge to live the gospel is lodged most acutely in the ordinary seasons of our lives. The struggle to be a faithful people can and must occur on the broad canvasses of public acts of social justice, but in order for such bold acts of faith to be possible, we must first believe that the gospel promises each of us the same thing it promises the world: new life transformed from brokenness to wholeness by the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is often a bold, courageous act to rise from bed each morning and claim gospel as the sole determinant of our life that day. The struggle to live the Easter gospel is enacted daily in the small but critical acts of faith we practice in the ordinariness of our lives, as we renounce that which brings us death and embrace the surprising and challenging presence of God.

The questions before the preacher in Pentecost season, then, are these: How do we live the gospel in ordinary time, when the spotlight of holy days is dimmed and the fanfare of Easter has faded? How do we keep the faith and live the faith in the face of the struggles and pains of our ordinary days? Where do we find the courage to embrace the gospel day after day when the fabric of our ordinary lives involves so much brokenness, despair, and desperation? The preacher in Pentecost season is called to hold together the struggle of *ordinary life* and the *extraordinary promise* of the gospel.

The Pentecost lectionary provides the preacher with resources to address these questions. The Old Testament lessons for the first three Sundays in Pentecost tell the story of Jacob (Gen. 25:19-34, 28:10-17; 32:22-32). Jacob's struggle for his share in God's promise embodies for us the power of the

extraordinary gospel for ordinary time.

I

Gen. 25:19-34 narrates the birth and young adulthood of Jacob and Esau. The passage can be divided into three units:

vv. 19-23	Introduction
vv.24-26	The Birth of the brothers
vv.27-34	The Young Adulthood of Esau and Jacob

Each of the three units is marked by struggle and conflict.

The introductory verses (vv. 19-23) explicitly locate the story of Jacob and Esau within the ongoing story of the promise to Abraham and Sarah. Verse 19 refers to all three generations (Abraham, Isaac, the descendants of Isaac) and thus reminds us that the story of Jacob and Esau belongs to the Pentateuchal drama of God as promise-maker and promise-keeper. The pivotal promise of an heir is in jeopardy as the story begins, however. Rebekah is barren and Isaac prays to God for help. Isaac's prayer is answered and Rebekah conceives (v.21). Both Rebekah's barrenness and Isaac's prayer remind the reader that the security of the promise depends on God and human faith in God. Isaac trusted in God's promises even when the conditions of his life indicated otherwise, and was bold enough to remind God of those promises.

Verses 22-23 introduce the theme of struggle and conflict that is the distinctive mark of the Jacob story. The children cause Rebekah pain as they struggle in her womb, and like her husband before her, she turns to God for help (v.22). God's answer, the oracle of v.23 gives theological meaning to the children's struggle. In reading v.23, we need to be careful lest our familiarity with this story prevents us from hearing the radical message of these words.

The oracle of v.23 announces an evangelical inversion in which the social conventions of primogeniture will be overturned and the last will be first. The preeminence and legal and fiscal priority of the firstborn son were a given in Isaac and Rebekah's time, but here we have a word of God that challenges such a social arrangement. The inversion promised by God is scandalous, because it announces that we are not limited to nor fated by any social arrangement,¹ no matter how deeply embedded in the social fabric that arrangement seems to be. This oracle thus announces that God's promise will override the limitations of social convention and institutions. No social convention will rob Jacob, or any child of the gospel, of a full share in God's promise. The oracle of v.23 establishes the decisive paradigm for the Jacob story.

The birth of the brothers is narrated in vv.24-26. This birth narrative, like the oracle of v.23, foreshadows what is to come. Esau is born before Jacob, but the conflict in their relationship is dramatically conveyed by Jacob's hand on Esau's heel. Jacob's act at birth looms so large in the storyteller's mind that Jacob's name is derived from it. Even as an infant, Jacob struggles against the

social tyranny of birth order. Jacob will not be denied his place in the story of the promise simply because he is second born. The oracle of v.23 is already at work.

The struggle between the two brothers receives its first full narrative treatment in vv.27-34. The two brothers grow in separate directions, the hunter (Esau) and the shepherd (Jacob) (v.27). Their differing lives evoke differing responses from their parents (v.28). The conflict between the brothers is thus reflected in the preferential, partisan love of the parents. The family of Isaac is a divided family, parent against parent, brother against brother (cf Luke 12:53, Matt 10:35-36).

The conflict reaches a head in vv. 29-34. The story of the pottage both continues the oracle of v.23 and anticipates the story of the blessing in Gen 27. The setting for the drama could hardly be more "ordinary": a campfire and a bowl of soup between brothers. The ordinary holds seeds of great consequence, however. Esau has only one thing on his mind—he is hungry. He is more concerned with satisfying his immediate hunger than thinking about the future (v.34). Esau has all the rights and privileges of the first-born, but they mean nothing to him (v.32). Jacob recognizes the value of the birthright, however, and so satisfies Esau's present needs in order to provide for his own future (vv.31,33). Esau sells his future for a bowl of soup that has no value beyond the present moment. But God's promises push us beyond the present moment into the hope of a future. Esau has given up on the future ("I am about to die"), and so renounces the promise ("of what use is a birthright to me").

The story of God's promise in Gen. 25 is narrated with specificity and concreteness. It is constructed out of the ordinary stuff of our lives, food and family. The story of the promise is played out neither in theological generalities nor in a narrative of epic proportions, but in the very specific struggle of two brothers. One brother has no institutional claim to the promise, but he does value the promise and what it holds for his future. He has received a chance to be a full member of the promise through the surprising providence of God (v.23). Jacob will fight for the promise, because he will allow nothing to restrict his access to the fullness of life offered him by God. This lesson reminds us that those who value God's promise may have to challenge the limits of social convention in the ordinary places of our lives in order to be full inheritors of God's grace.

II

Gen. 28:10-17 begins with Jacob leaving his homeland and heading for Haran (v.10). He is on a potentially perilous journey, fleeing the anger of his brother (27:41) and reversing the journey Abraham took in response to God's call (*Gen. 12:1-9*). Jacob has secured the birthright and the blessing, but that gain has had a price. Jacob has left all his known resources behind him and must begin life anew. He is a man in exile, searching for a home. The very road on which he travels seems devoid of succor, for Jacob is forced to sleep on the ground in an unknown place, with only a stone for a pillow (v.11).

Verses 10-11 thus set the stage for the dream of vv.12-15. In order to obtain the birthright and the blessing, Jacob had to take risks for what he valued and wanted. He would not be shut out of the promise, but now he finds himself shut out of his previously known world. The promise has set Jacob on an unmarked, uncharted road. As he begins this journey, his vulnerability is fully exposed. The external data says that Jacob is alone in the world. The life-giving dream of vv. 12-15, however, reveals that in truth Jacob is not alone.

The dream is in two parts, one visual (v.12), the other auditory (vv.13-15). The vision in v.12 is of a ladder or ramp extending between heaven and earth. The angels, God's messengers, move up and down this ladder, providing open communication between heaven and earth. The chasm between heaven and earth is not unbridgeable (cf. Luke 16:26), but is crossed by angels who are bearers of God's presence. Sleeping, vulnerable, exiled Jacob is not left alone on his journey; he is visited in the wilderness by a host of angels (cf. Ps 91:11, Luke 2:9-14). God's presence is available when and where we least expect it, transforming a troubled, lonely night into a radiant moment of awe and expectation.

The vision is a prelude to the heart of the dream, the words of promise spoken by God in vv.13-15. God's speech begins with a recital of the standard promise of the patriarchal narrative (vv.13-14): land, descendants, and the related blessing upon all the families of the earth. We may have expected Yahweh to judge or censure Jacob for the way in which he obtained the blessing, but Yahweh does not see as we do (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). Yahweh's announcement of the patriarchal promise directly to Jacob establishes him as the full successor to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob, the man who would not settle for less than a full life, is acknowledged as the new bearer of the promise.

Yahweh's words in v.15 move beyond the standard patriarchal promise and speak directly to Jacob's situation. Yahweh makes three promises to Jacob in v.15: I am with you; I will keep you wherever you go; I will bring you back to this land. Jacob faces a perilous journey on the road to new life, and Yahweh sends him on his way with all the resources he will need to meet what awaits him. God will accompany Jacob, care for Jacob, and bring Jacob home. Jacob thus goes into the unknown with God's promises of presence, caretaking, and homecoming.² This is an astonishing promise, and again we need to be careful lest our familiarity with the story rob this promise of its full weight. This promise moves beyond the conventional promise of land and heirs to address the acute needs of Jacob's life in exile.

Each of these three promises is undergirded by the assertion, "*for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.*" Yahweh guarantees the fulfillment of the promise with an unfaltering assurance, God-with-us, Emmanuel. God is fully involved in Jacob's journey to new life and will not leave him until he has found his life and come home.

Verses 16-17 narrate Jacob's response when he wakes from his dream, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." The emphasis in both verses is on God's presence *in this place*, not on God's presence *per se*. Jacob's dream has shown him that God travels with him in exile, that he does not lose God when he ventures away from the known in his journey toward life in the

promise. God surprised Jacob, and continues to surprise us, by being present even when we risk the unknown. God's promise that God will be with us until we find our way home makes any journey possible.

III

Gen. 32:22-32 is set in the middle of Jacob's journey home. The narrative has brought Jacob (and us) to the hour of reckoning: the time when Jacob will meet the brother from whom he has fled, the time when God's promises of presence and caretaking until homecoming will be put to the test.

When Jacob set out on his journey to Haran, he was a solitary traveler on an unknown road (28:10-11). By contrast, he is accompanied on his return by servants, all manner of livestock, his wives and children, and even a host of angels (32:1,5). Nonetheless, on the night before he is to meet Esau, Jacob sends his family across the river ahead of him (vv.22-23). He may send them ahead in order to ensure their safe passage, but Jacob's act serves a larger purpose in the overall Jacob narrative. His journey home, like his journey into exile, must be made alone (v.24a).

The main action of the narrative begins abruptly in v.24b. Jacob's opponent appears with no introduction (he will depart in a similar manner, vv.30-31). The physical wrestling is described in summary terms, "and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day." The wrestling match ends in a draw (v.25a). The opponent is then able to injure Jacob (v.25b), but even that does not win his release. He must initiate conversation with Jacob.

The conversation consists of three speeches. In the first speech (v.26), the wrestler asks Jacob to release him. Jacob will not let the wrestler go until he secures a blessing from him, however. The night stranger is no longer merely a formidable wrestling partner; he is someone who has the power to bless Jacob. Jacob's request thus reveals that he senses the presence of God in his partner. Jacob's request also is in continuity with his very first acts in Rebekah's womb. Jacob will fight and struggle to secure a life of blessing and promise.

The conversation partner will not give up the blessing any more easily than Jacob will let him go, however. He asks first to be told Jacob's name, and Jacob obliges him (v.27). "Jacob" is the name with which Jacob entered the wrestling match, but it is not the name with which he shall leave: "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed" (v.28).

Verse 28 is the most explicit statement in the story of the identity of Jacob's wrestling partner. Jacob wrestled with a man in the shadows of the night, and in that wrestling found himself wrestling God. And Jacob/Israel was no common wrestler—he prevailed in his struggle with God and in so doing gained life and a new identity. What a name and identity for a forebear, what a name and identity for a people—one who will stand toe to toe with God and not back down! Jacob receives the name of Israel because of his willingness to battle God into the night for his life.

In the last speech (v.29) Jacob asks for his partner's name, but the name is not forthcoming. Instead the conversation partner asks Jacob one more

question, "Why is it that you ask my name?" Why indeed? Jacob does not need a name to know who his conversation partner is. The partner has revealed his identity through his acts: he gives a new name, a new life, a new blessing (v.29c). Jacob does not receive the name of God, but in its place he receives the fullness of God's gifts.

The wrestler/conversation partner/namer/blesser leaves the narrative unnamed. He is introduced to us in v.24 as "a man," but by the end of the story Jacob will be convinced that he has wrestled with God (v.30). To try to determine precisely whether Jacob's opponent was "man" or God is to misread the intentional ambiguity and mystery of the story. Jacob does wrestle with God, but he wrestles with God in the draining, exhausting, wounding arena of an all night wrestling match with a flesh and blood opponent. Jacob's struggle with God is true to the dynamics of the life of faith. Struggles with God are not ephemeral, abstract, otherworldly events; struggles with God happen in the here and now, in the sweat and strain of daily (and nightly) decisions. This story models for us the truth of our lives: we meet God as we fight for our lives each and every day.

Jacob's struggle with God in this lesson is intensely *incarnational*. If we believe God's promises for our lives and futures, the struggle can be no other way. At the critical junctures of our lives, in our daily struggles of life and self, we, like Jacob, come face to face with God. To avoid the conflict, to turn away from tough decisions, is not only to lose the struggle. It is also to lose God. Jacob prevailed with God and received the blessing because he was bold, brave, and *faithful* enough to hold on until the new day dawned.

Jacob leaves this encounter with God with a new limp (v.31). He is marked by his struggle and he will bear that mark for the rest of his life. Jacob's limp reminds us that ours is a cruciform life. There is no new life, no gift from God without cost (cf. 1 Cor 6:20). We cannot slide painlessly from the old to the new, from death to life. The only way to avoid the cost is to avoid the struggle, but in avoiding the struggle we lose our only chance for fullness of life. We are children of the one who struggled with God and humans and prevailed, so we must believe that we too can prevail. We must not let the pain of the struggle deter us, but keep wrestling for our lives until we receive the blessing.

IV

Jacob was a man who would not let go. From his hand on Esau's heel at birth to his unshakeable hold on the wrestler in the night, Jacob would not let go. He would not give up on God's promises for his life and future. Jacob was an ordinary man, the second son, not even the first born, but he believed in the extraordinary promises of God. Because of that faith, he was bold enough to imagine a new life for himself, a life beyond social conventions and institutional expectations (Gen. 25), a life lived in the assurance of God's guiding presence (Gen. 28), a life wrestled boldly from God (Gen. 32). This, then, is how we, ordinary people, not many of us first born (cf. Rom 9:9-13), are called to live the gospel in the ordinary seasons of our lives: to embrace God's extraordinary promises, imagine a life shaped by those promises, and hold God to

the fulfillment of those promises.

NOTES

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 209, 215-17.

² *Ibid.*, 246.