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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Genesis 35: 1-4
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Have Done With Lesser Things

Our Scripture lesson this week picks up immediately after the story we considered a week ago. If Genesis 34 chronicles the terrible destruction unleashed by two of Jacob's children, chapter 35 constitutes a reorientation. If Genesis 34 represents what it is to be in thrall to a destructive cycle of humiliation and violence, our Scripture lesson for today suggests what it is to renounce such a cycle, or in the words of the hymn we sang a little earlier, "to have done with lesser things."

But first, a brief recap of last week. The gist of Genesis 34 is that Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi come to believe that their entire family had been dishonored when they discover that their sister Dinah had a sexual liaison with a young man named Shechem. We don't learn what Dinah thought or felt, and so we don't know if it was a mutually consenting relationship, as we say now, or not. One way or another, Simeon and Levi are incensed, and so they sneak into the city where Shechem lives (also called Shechem) and they plunder it, murdering many of its inhabitants. It's a difficult story, often ignored because of its brutality. But it discloses a dynamic of honor and dishonor, of humiliation and of pride that is still very much with us today. That cycle is evident in the wars unfolding around the planet. It's evident in the attraction that many people seem to feel toward the politics of the far right. And it's evident in policies and behaviors that are damaging to women in particular, but really toward anyone unfortunate enough to be caught up in those dynamics of humiliation and its aftermath. In essence, I believe that much of the world has become Dinah, and that in order to survive, we must learn to heed her voiceless voice, if such a thing makes sense.

The story we're concentrating on today takes place just after Jacob has discovered what his sons have wrought. Whereas the name of God is nowhere to be found in the previous chapter, Genesis 35 opens with the voice of God speaking to Jacob. He is told to flee from that place of horror, together with his entire household. But Jacob gives the members of his house, including, presumably, his sons, an interesting set of instructions as they depart. They are to set aside what the text calls their "foreign gods," or what some translations call their "false gods." They are to put on different clothes. They are to remove the rings from their ears, and they are to bury both their gods and their rings beneath a tree, near the city of Shechem.

It's a passage that our Bible study group wrestled with several weeks ago. And once again, I'm so glad we took the time to consider this epilogue to the tale of Dinah, and of Simeon and Levi. Reading between the lines, it reveals Jacob, as a parent, coming to terms with an overwhelming event, something he could not have imagined or comprehended. Why is it that God only speaks to Jacob after the fact, we wondered? How are we to understand his order to bury the so-called "foreign gods" or "false gods" that members of his household were carrying? And why are they ordered to put on new clothes? Might this too provide insights into the world as we find it today? Might this also be a story about our own world, about our lives, and not some relic of the pre-modern age?

To get at those questions, I'd like to lay out each element of the story, beginning first of all with Jacob. When people talk about family values, and urge the Bible upon us to support

such values, we can wonder if they have ever actually read the book of Genesis, and if they have read the story of Jacob. Jacob's family is a disaster, and I wouldn't wish any family - yours, mine, anyone's - to emulate his. Even so, Jacob is a figure we can easily recognize. Though his is a rather extreme case, I think Jacob stands for each of us who, as parents, have ever wondered if we have done what is best for our children, or if we have modeled the sorts of qualities we hope to instill in them. But perhaps too, he is also the adult child forced to wonder about the family scripts that were handed to him, and that he, in turn, handed to his own kids. Did Jacob somehow sense the cycle of humiliation and shame that his two sons had displayed, and wonder if he was responsible? And did he wonder how to break the terrible cycle that his sons had unleashed? Let Jacob stand for each of us who has ever wondered if our own flaws, or own mistakes or failures had been handed over to the next generation. Let Jacob stand for each of us who has ever resolved to do and to be better for the sake of those who are coming up after us. Let Jacob stand for each of us who has surveyed the mistakes of the past, whether personal mistakes or collective ones, and has resolved to change the things they can, while leaving behind what they cannot.

Next, we need to focus on the false gods that Jacob orders his household to renounce, and to bury. I have in the past expressed skepticism about the ways polytheism is sometimes depicted in the Bible, given how such prohibitions have functioned in the modern era to demean, discredit, or worse, those from Indigenous and African traditions who fall outside monotheistic practices. But this is somehow different. The text hints that these so-called false gods or idols were somehow behind the killings unleashed by Simeon and Levi. When those gods are buried, they are buried under a tree in Shechem, the very site of the earlier carnage, as if to suggest that these were gods of death, gods of destruction, best left behind on the killing fields Jacob attempts to flee. And so let the false gods in our story stand for all the damaging narratives that trap us within cycles of destruction. Let the false gods stand for all the ideologies and beliefs where killing comes to seem justified, where greed comes to seem good, and where the erasure of peoples and cultures is understood to be the price of progress, the price of security. Let the false gods stand for all the forces of tribalism, nationalism, patriarchy and ecological plunder that have by now proven so tempting, and so lethal to far too many people. Let the false gods stand for the many destructive narratives in our world that we are now called upon to bury.

And God, what of God? What are we to make of God's sudden reemergence on the scene, after things had gone so catastrophically wrong? Throughout the pages of Scripture, God comes to be identified with the vulnerable and the weak, the poor and the afflicted ones. Not always and everywhere - Scripture contains an evolving understanding of God - but by and large, the voice of God is disclosed in moments of personal or communal vulnerability, an insight that reaches an apex in the cross of Jesus the Christ. I suspect that something like that insight was occurring for Jacob as well. In the aftermath of so much bloodshed, perhaps we can say that God came to speak, silently, voicelessly, through the victims of that terrible event, like Dinah, like all the residents of the city of Shechem. When God came to Jacob, it was as a voice urging him to return to the place of his own most extreme vulnerability, where he had come to understand something of who and what God was. And so let God stand for all those who are vulnerable in our world. Let God stand for the voiceless voice of the victims, whosoever they may be, those whose gaze arrests us, those who call us up short, and convict us with their moral force. But let God stand for the vulnerable and tender places inside of us as well, where we are moved to tears, to prayers, but also toward compassion, toward righteous anger, and toward action. Let God

stand for the force that moves us and others to do what we can to set the world aright, that the human family might flourish and share a future together.

And finally Beth-el...what are we to make of Beth-el? It is the place in which Jacob first learned to become vulnerable. It was where, alone and afraid, he was forced to come to terms with his own duplicity. It was where he was shown a different pathway, one that ultimately led to a reconciliation with his brother, to a forgiveness that had once seemed unimaginable. It was where he was given a vision of the future that seemed healing and hopeful, where he could dream of old enmities put to rest. It was a place where God felt somehow near. And so let Beth-el stand for the places and spaces in which our common humanity is restored. Let Beth-el stand for those places - so hard to believe in - where peoples who had once been at odds with one another come to respect and care for the other's well being. Let it stand for the places where such dreams of restoration of human dignity are revived.

It is there, toward Beth-el, that Jacob returns after the catastrophe. It is there that I believe we are all called to journey just now.

If I've spent an overlong time laying out the elements of this story, it is in order to shed greater light on one of the tragedies currently unfolding in our world. The one I have in mind is Gaza throughout this past year, but really for many years before that as well. As in our text this morning, it is a story in which the false and lying gods of this world have been disclosed, not unlike the way they were when Simeon and Levi unleashed their fury upon Shechem. What would it mean to come to our senses, like Jacob? What would it mean to bury the false and lying gods, the ones that have led to so many dead and wounded bodies? What would it mean to hear the voiceless voice of God speaking to us now through the damaged and the dead? Might there be a Beth-el, even at this late hour, that it is possible to journey toward?

Perhaps, even after all I've said, you're tempted to believe that the false and lying gods are features of some primitive world, but not our own. I would have you reconsider that belief. They're still very much with us. They're with us in the munitions dropped on hospitals and schools, on mosques and apartment buildings, so that there are scarcely any buildings left standing in Gaza. They are with us in the sniper bullets used on children, and in the shrapnel that has wounded or disfigured nearly 100,000 people. The false and lying gods are with us in the nearly 45,000 people that have been killed to date in Gaza, a number that promises to climb even after the killing of Hamas's leader. The false and lying gods are with us in the starving children, and in the emotional wreckage of people who have witnessed their entire family being incinerated. Doctors have even come up with a new designation for children bearing such traumas: WCNSF - Wounded Child, No Surviving Family. The false and lying gods are still with us today, and they are more dangerous than ever.

Of course, many if not most of the munitions used against the people in Gaza, including its children, have been supplied by the United States. While calling for greater aid to flow into Gaza, the U.S. government has cynically been providing the very weapons used to injure and wound the people it claims it would like to help. I think I've shared this before, but our mission partner Paul Verryn has compared it to arming someone with a gun, while telling the soon to be victim not to worry, because bandages will soon arrive. Guided missile systems, tank rounds, high explosive mortar rounds, tactical vehicles, and aircrafts have all been supplied to Israel, and a new proposal for additional weapons, to the tune of \$20 billion dollars, is currently on the table.

And so what would it mean now to bury the false gods under the tree of Shechem, the scene of so much carnage? I would like to suggest that a contemporary analogue to Jacob's

prohibition of false gods would be the prohibition of any further arms sales to Israel. The contemporary analogue to Jacob rediscovering the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God who appeared to him at Beth-el, would be to renounce narratives suggesting this is all somehow necessary, or that this is all collateral damage in the interest of safety or security. This devilish collusion is, I believe, precisely what Jacob was seeking to undo when he had his household renounce, and then bury, their false deities. It's time for us to bury our own false gods.

Senator Bernie Sanders is leading the way in this regard. Citing the sheer savagery of Israel's war, together with its defiance of both U.S. and international law, Sanders is introducing a bill in the Senate to block further arms sales to Israel. He is joined by his colleague from Vermont, Peter Welch, as well as by Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley. Theirs is a minority voice, to say the least, but I believe it's one worthy of being heeded. Indeed, I believe it's worthy of voicing our support to our own Senate delegation, though I'm under no illusions that they'll be swayed. Even so, I'm asking you to call them, and to write them. And while the House tilts in exactly the opposite direction, I believe we need to let our House delegates hear from us as well. It's a way of doing what we can, however small, to bury the false gods that have led us to where we are.

But what of God, finally, and what of Beth-el? I believe that God is speaking from the rubble, from the ashes, from the wounded, and from the dead. And I continue to believe that in such ways, God is calling the world to journey toward a new kind of Beth-el, a land where Jews and Palestinians are granted equal human rights under an entirely rewritten constitution. But this new Beth-el is also a place in which the weapons manufacturers are called to account, and where the false and lying gods of nationalism and tribalism, racism and xenophobia, misogyny and machismo are so thoroughly discredited as to be untenable.

For those who don't believe it's possible to recreate Beth-el, I can only say that many of us have already seen glimmers of such a possibility, however faintly, however tentatively, on our Tree of Life journeys, when Rami Elhanan, whose daughter was murdered by Palestinians, and when George Sahadeh, whose daughter was murdered by the IDF, grasp one another by the hand, and call one another "brother." It's a faltering vision, and an exceedingly fragile one right now. But the spirit of Beth-el does still exist. It is still possible to create places where forgiveness and humility, where dignity and a common humanity prevail. It's still possible to bury the false and lying gods, and to make that journey toward Beth-el together as a human community.

And is that not, finally, the journey we're asked to make here, Sunday by Sunday, together? Even if our struggles persist, even if the false and lying gods continue to do their work, we have the opportunity to make of FCCOL, and the places around us, the signal flashes of a new Beth-el, the advance guard of the new being, a place where we clothe ourselves in new and different garments - of forgiveness and of mercy, of hope and of dignity and of grace. A place that is done with lesser things, as we labor together for a new Beth-el, a day of peace that even now is still dimly, dimly, shining.