Ash Wednesday
Rolling Meadows -- 1979

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IN NOMINE JESU

Genesis 27: 18-29

We Americans are really hooked into the PLEASURE and HAPPINESS syndrome. We want everything that will bring us DELIGHT and GOOD FORTUNE. We avoid anything that might bring us PAIN or DISCOMFORT. In fact, when things get TOO UNBEARABLE, we leap for the PAIN PILLS and TRANQUILIZERS. Our type of EVANGELISM goes something like: "Join the Church and get on God's side and you will be on easy street and live happily ever after." And at the same time, we avoid -- like the "bubonic plague" -- anything which might cause us DISCOMFORT. Don't let anybody talk about "sackcloth and ashes" as being a SIGN OF REPENTANCE. Much less do we want to hear those fatal and final words: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Somehow, we are unable to accept the reality that there must be a CRUCIFIXION before there can be a RESURRECTION. The "WILL OF GOD" must be to our ADVANTAGE -- apart from suffering, passion, or death. ..... Isn't that the way we think about God and the Church and what they are to do for us? We are certain that BECAUSE WE ARE CHRISTIANS all these BLESSINGS FROM GOD must certainly be coming our way. And sometimes we try to MANIPULATE and FORCE THESE BLESSINGS to come to pass.

That was the problem with JACOB. GOD was TOO SLOW in acting. JACOB was certain that he should be on top. He believed that it was clearly GOD'S WILL that HE SHOULD BE FIRST and his twin brother ESAU SECOND. ..... There was no arguing that ESAU had come out of his mother's womb FIRST -- but had not the Lord told his mother Rebekah, "THE

ELDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER"? Furthermore, it probably seemed quite obvious to JOCOB that he was the BETTER MAN for the job -- the BETTER LEADER of the clan. ESAU, after all, was always off on a HUNTING TRIP. JACOB undoubtedly kept repeating to himself, "I am number one." And as we all know ---- If you tell yourself something often enough, you really do begin to believe it -- and what is more, you try everythir within your power to make it happen.

So the day arrived when FATHER ISAAC -- now blind, and his other senses failing as wel -- wished to give his FINAL AND BEST BLESSING TO ESAU. He told ESAU to go out -- shoo some game -- and bring it to him that he might eat it and then bless him before he died. ..... It was at this point that REBEKAH went into action. As soon as ESAU was outside the camp, she told JACOB to bring a meal to his blind father and GET THE BLESS ING FOR HIMSELF. ..... At first JACOB was afraid, but REBEKAH insisted. ..... If the saying had been popular in those days, she probably would have told him, "God helps those who help themselves." ..... She gave JACOB Esau's clothes -- disguised him -- put a bowl of savory food in his hands -- and pointed him toward ISAAC'S TENT. ..... Once he was inside, Jacob joined wholeheartedly in the FRAUD. He wanted to bring to QUICK FULFILLMENT the PROMISES OF GOD. And when ISAAC -- very suspicious -- asked how ESAU had gotten back so quickly with the game, JACOB replied with a great show of piety: "BECAUSE THE LORD YOUR GOD GRANTED ME SUCCESS." .... WHAT A FAKER!

But hold on! It is precisely at this point that WE SEE OURSELVES. There is an old Jewish saying, "Leave a little to God." The trouble is that we do NOT WANT TO LISTEN TO THIS ADVICE any more than JACOB did. ..... How often haven't we felt that we must FORCE A SOLUTION which will GUARANTEE GOD'S BLESSINGS? How often haven't we used the argument, "If we don't take matters into our own hands, how will we who are GOD'S PEOPLE ever get what has been promised to us?" ..... And that means that we FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM instead of ON GOD. ..... While it may be nice to TALK ABOUT FAITH and ALL THAT ---- we still want to make sure that things TURN OUT THE WAY WE PLANNED. We become "Jacobs" who are sure that it is our calling to OUTMANEUVER the "Esaus" blocking out way to a successful life.

"Jacobs" do not really fare too well. As JESUS warned PETER: "ALL WHO TAKE THE SWORD WILL PERISH BY THE SWORD." The first JACOB discovered that. He BARGAINED ESAU out of his rights as the FIRSTBORN. Then he TRICKED ISAAC into giving him the FIRST BLESSING And it must have appeared to him that HIS DESTINY WAS SECURE. ..... That is what "he" thought. ..... But there was ONE LITTLE PROBLEM. ..... ESAU soon announced that there would not be ONE but TWO FUNERALS in the family. He SWORE ALOUD: "THE DAYS OF MOURNING FOR MY FATHER ARE APPROACHING; THEN I WILL KILL MY BROTHER JACOB." ..... In their terror JACOB and REBEKAH could think of only one thing to do. ..... JACOB would have to FLEE FOR HIS LIFE.

So it goes. It is really no accident that one of the most familiar sayings in our day is, "Out of the frying pan into the fire." Our efforts to GRAB A BLESSING turn on us. ..... That happened to CAIAPHAS. He thought he was doing the RIGHT THING by getting rid of Jesus. "IT IS EXPEDIENT THAT ONE MAN SHOULD DIE FOR THE PEOPLE." It must have appeared to him that everything was going to work out splendidly after he had made a deal with JUDAS. Perhaps he even offered a PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING: "PEACE AT LAST!"

Certainly scholars have conjectured that the BETRAYAL OF JESUS was itself an EFFORT BY JUDAS to FORCE GOD'S HAND and thus to QUICKLY USHER IN THE KINGDOM OF GLORY. ..... We all know how PETER WHIPPED OUT HIS SWORD as GOD'S ANSWER to the present problem. And he used it too. ..... The fact is that the Bible is filled with stories of people who are so intent on SOLVING GOD'S PROBLEMS that they have ended up DISREGARDING GOD HIMSELF. .... It happens all the time. It happens to us.

Jesus knew a better way. Look at Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He HELD ON TO THE PROMISES OF GOD in a situation which seemed to DENY THE TRUSTWORTHINESS of every promise ever made to Him. Whatever the FATHER had said in the past --- WHERE WAS THAT NOW? Was not HIS ABSENCE a sign that JESUS SHOULD TAKE THINGS INTO HIS OWN HANDS to show HIS POWER AND GLORY? Shouldn't He call the 12 LEGIONS OF ANGELS to His side? Shouldn't He FORCE GOD'S WILL to coincide with HIS WILL?

Certainly He could have argued that He was only promoting the LONG RANGE PLANS OF GOD As the "FIRSTBORN OF GOD" why not claim at that very moment the WORLD AND ITS KINGDOMS /.... He could have done that! But He did not. His "FOOD" was to be a part of the "FATHER'S WILL" -- nothing more and nothing less. ..... If it was HIS FATHER'S WILL to go to the UNCLEAR CROSS -- then SO BE IT!

And so it must be with us. We must not look for the EASY WAY! To "TAKE UP OUR CROSS AND FOLLOW JESUS" means ultimately that ONLY THROUGH THE CROSS is the RESURRECTION possible. If that is PLEASURE and HAPPINESS -- COMFORT and CONVENIENCE ---- then that is ours. Amen.