

Reimagining the future

Genesis 46

You know what they say - 'If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.' It's a popular enough comment, but it came from Woody Allen - not the Bible.

How often do you find yourself picturing the future that lies before you, settling into the idea in your mind, as if all that needs to happen now is the unfolding of what you have imagined - and then those plans get suddenly, surprisingly transformed as something new and unexpected changes the shape of your life?

Woody Allen's quote depicts a God who would mock and belittle us as we go through the vulnerability of things turning out differently than we had imagined. But the Bible doesn't. God's self-description in His Word, including here in Genesis 46, reveals a God who reaches out to us in the moments where our imagined futures lie in tatters on the floor. A God who says, 'Don't be afraid... I'm with you... Come with me this way.'

At the start of Genesis 46, Jacob begins a very unexpected journey. The last thing he knew, his son Joseph was dead, and he would see out the winter years of his life in famine-ravaged Canaan. Now, all of a sudden, he's heard that Joseph is alive - not only that, he's ruler of Egypt. And there's lots of food stored up there. And they can all go stay in Egypt with him.

So here Jacob is in v.1, suddenly 'setting out with all that was his' on this journey that he never imagined he would take, for a future he never dreamed was on the cards. Along the way, he stops at a significant place - Beersheba. We're told that here, Jacob offered sacrifices to 'the God of his father Isaac.'

This was the place where his father Isaac had dug a well and built an altar. The place where his father before him, Abraham, had planted a tree and cried out to the Lord. A place of family foundations, and a spiritual home. A place that was homely and holy for Jacob.

In this place, God had appeared to Isaac, and made promises to him about the future. In just the next verse, Jacob would discover that God was going to speak to him here, too. But before that happened, for his part, Jacob marked the new phase of his life's journey that he was unexpectedly on by going to the place where he and his fathers had ever sought the Lord.

Is there a place like that for you? When something comes in your life that looks like a big change; a re-imagined future - is there a place that's significant to you that you could go to pray? A place that is significant to you and your family before you, or a spiritual home, or both? Somewhere that you could meet with God in the milestone of a new journey in your life?

Where is your 'Beersheba'? Is there a reason for you to go there now?

(In a corporate sense, we have an opportunity to do this tonight. Lots of people in lots of churches in Inverness are sensing that God is about to lead us into a new journey here in this place. Tonight, at 6pm, churches are gathering in Inverness Cathedral - a Beersheba for our city, surely - to seek God in this moment. Join us if you can!)

This journey to Egypt that Jacob is undertaking with all that is his, family and possessions, was the last thing that they imagined for their future. This is a big surprise in the midst of the plans and promises that this family had heard from God over the generations. We're reminded of these plans and promises as God speaks directly to Jacob; and it is, oddly enough, the first time that God's speech is quoted in the whole Joseph story.

Can this *really* be the first time that God's words are recorded in this whole narrative that we've been reading for months? And it comes to *Jacob*, not Joseph? It's a reminder of what we read in our very first sermon on the Joseph series. Back in Genesis 37:1-2, we read that 'this is the story of *Jacob*.'

It's not the story of one young man, Joseph, and how God did things in his life. It's a story that fits into a bigger one in Genesis. The story of Abraham, who heard a promise from God that he and his family would belong to God, that God would make them into a great nation, that God would bless the world through them, and that God would give them a land of their own.

The story of Isaac, who received the same promises that his father did. Adoption by God. Identity as a nation of His people. Blessing to them and through them to the world. And a land to call their own home.

But there's a huge twist in the plot in what God says to Jacob in vv.2-4. God says that He's going to make this family into a great nation *in Egypt*. Now, Jacob has already had a lot to take in - his son's actually *alive*, they're all off the Egypt to visit him, maybe even stay there long term...

But consider what God is telling Jacob here. Israel (the other name for Jacob, and the name that this nation would take) is going to become a nation, not in the land that God promised them, but in Egypt. Is this a *change* of plan? Has God told them one thing, then done another?

Well, no. God doesn't do that. He's consistent and dependable. But that doesn't reduce His capacity to surprise us! God had promised land to this people, and one day they would reach their true home. But, much to their surprise, Egypt would be the surrogate womb for them to become a great nation. They were to become not just visitors there, but immigrants.

Actually, God is revealing something of His plan that had until this point been hidden. Back in Genesis 15, when God first made a covenantal promise to Jacob's grandfather Abraham, He said right from the off that their descendants would be 'strangers in a country not their own.' More than that; they would be enslaved and ill treated for 400 years. It's here in Genesis 46:3 that we discover that it's Egypt that all of this is going to happen in.

This is not a change of plan; it was always part of God's plan. Even the 400 years of slavery. The first readers of Genesis were the children of the Exodus people who had experienced that slavery. And here they are reading that God had plans and purposes through all of that. For some reason, they needed to go through that before arriving at the true home they were promised - but the promised land *was* to come.

In v.4, God promises Jacob that 'I will go down to Egypt with you, and *I will surely bring you back again.*' They are not going straight to the future they had imagined. They have to go away in order to come back again. The path is different to the one that had pictured; but it's entirely consistent with the one that God had mapped out for them.

Now there is so much in this that may apply to you, and does apply to us all. For some of you, the Spirit of God may be speaking through this passage about a surprising twist in your future that has come upon you. As you get your head around that, know that God speaks to you with tenderness and assurance.

He knows your shock, so He says to you 'Do not be afraid... I am with you...' He knows your confusion, so He says to you 'You need to go away in order to come back again.' He knows your pain, so He says to you, 'There is purpose in the years of suffering; it *is* part of the plan, it's not useless.'

Some of you have been Christians for just a short time, and you've discovered this new future that lies before you, a future that you're mapping out in your mind. But there are twists and turns and reimaginings to go through as you discover more of the plans, commands, promises and purposes of God. God says, 'Trust me... come the way I'm showing you. There's a reason for it.'

And to all of us who put their faith in Jesus, we receive these promises from the God who still speaks to His people in this way. We are adopted as those who belong to God. We will be His people, and He will be our God. He's going to bless us, and others through us, with life to the full, now and forever. There is a land He has promised us; a New Heavens and New Earth that is the inheritance we're headed for beyond death.

But first there's this: We will grow into a great nation, a Kingdom of God's people, here in the womb of this world. We are immigrants here. Immigrants who are to build a life and flourish as His people here and now. We're not supposed to just wait it out until Kingdom come.

We're supposed to grow, like a child keeps growing in the womb, until it's born into the world it was made for. And somehow, that growth into what we will be eternally happens through the gestation of this journey in this beautiful, fragile world that pulses with pain in contractions ever more frequent and intense. This is the imagery that Paul uses in Romans 8; that creation is in labour until the children of God grow enough to be ready to be born into the new life they were created for.

'I am God, the God of your Father... Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again.'

In what ways have you had to 'go away in order to come back again'? Is there a way you need to do that now?

How committed are you to God? And how committed is God to you?

Let me sketch out two kinds of people - the 'dabbler' and the 'settler' - and see if one of them seems familiar to you. First of all, the 'dabbler.' You are someone who knows God's there. You're impressed by what you've experienced of Him; you're won over to Him the more you take time to draw near. But you're wary too. Wary about living like you're committed to Him with no way back.

You're happy to put one foot in the places where you're conscious of God - church, a small group, certain friends or family - but you're firmly keeping one foot planted firmly outside of that, so that you've got somewhere else to be. So you don't lose yourself completely to this God-thing that you might or might not want; that you think might or might not be true.

You have not learned to commit to God. You're scared of it. Why? You think it might not work. It might fall apart. You're afraid of how He'll change your life. You still think you might do a better job being in control than He will. You don't trust Him yet - not with your whole self.

Here's what Jacob did. When he heard good news from people he loved (his sons) that Joseph was alive, he believed it. He set out with everything he had based on that word he'd heard. When he took a moment before God, God met with him, and told him, 'Don't be afraid to commit completely to this new life, this new course. Do it. I'm here; I've got you.'

And Jacob held nothing back; vv.5-7 tell us he went all in - his whole family, all his possessions, his home - he left nothing behind, not a thing to keep a foot in what was familiar in case he needed to retreat. God says to you dabblers today: 'Don't be afraid. Jump over to me. Follow where I lead. Leave nothing back for 'just in case.' Be 'all in.' Trust me. You've learned enough about me to know that you can *trust* me. So do it!'

Then there's the 'settler.' You are someone who said years ago, 'Yes, God - I believe in you! And I accept your gift of Jesus dying for me to deal with my sin. And I believe He rose to life. And I know I'm adopted as yours, now and forever, through that. And I'll follow you anywhere, Jesus. I'm yours.'

And that's what happened. You gave God your whole self, and trusted Him entirely with where He would lead you. And He led you somewhere. And it was bumpy here and there. But at some point, you arrived somewhere that seemed comfortable and familiar. Something like Beersheba.

And you stayed there. Maybe consciously, maybe quite automatically. But it didn't occur to you once you'd reached this place that there would be any more twists in the plot or unimagined futures. When God stirred that up and put it before you, you either didn't recognise it, or else you did... But you said a quick, 'Honestly God? No, I'd rather not' before cracking on with life, telling yourself that the main thing is that you believe in Jesus so you're forgiven and your eternity is secure.

Here's what Jacob did. He obeyed when God spoke to him, in a hold-nothing-back way. At Beersheba, God told him that this journey to Egypt was going to be longer and harder than he'd realised. But God told him not to be afraid to go.

Now Jacob could have visited Egypt, seen Joseph, left one foot camped in Beersheba, in the hope that the family might all return to where he was familiar. But Jacob didn't do that. He left Beersheba, with everything he had, jumping in with two feet to the unexpected, unimagined call that God placed before him, even now in his winter years.

You might not be a dabbler or a settler. But I think a lot of us are. And I think God wants to call us to commit one hundred percent to Him now. Stop being scared of commitment. It's holding you back from God and His purposes for you and through you. Get your foot out of the camp you've stuck it in, and jump in, all in, with two feet to the life God is calling you into *right now*.

The reason you can do that with confidence is that God has promised to jump in with one hundred percent, all in commitment with you first. It's remarkable how God speaks in v.4. He says, 'I will go down to Egypt with you...' The commentator John H. Walton says this about it:

'This is just a little more explicit than 28:15, where God told Jacob, "I am with you and will watch over you."... in Genesis 28 it can be said that God was extending His arm of protection from Canaan to cover Jacob in his journeys. Here in Genesis 46, *God is packing up and going with Jacob to Egypt.*'

In the same breath that God says, 'Invest the whole of yourself in me and where I'm leading you without a safety net,' He tells you, 'I've invested the whole of myself in you without a safety net.' If you will go all in with God, you'll find that He is doing the same with you. He's not just giving you supplies on a Sunday when you knock on His door, or when you bother picking up the phone to Him in prayer - He's right there with you, alongside you on the journey that He called you to make.

This is the God we read of in the Bible. Just as God went with Jacob to Egypt, the womb where God's people would grow; the Son of God left the glory and safety of Heaven to dwell in the fragility of an *actual* womb. He lived and walked with us in this world, Jesus Christ, fully human, experiencing right there with us the noise and dirt and mess and beauty and pain and surprise and exhaustion and emotion and red-bloodedness of life as we see

it, hear it, smell it, taste it and touch it. He packed up everything to be right here with us.

And today, the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself, is given to dwell in the life of every single person who comes to life through faith in Jesus Christ. He is resident with His people. God has been packing up everything to be right with us on the journey for thousands of years. He's all in with you. He's not scared to do that; He's not put off by you. Don't be scared to commit to God. Don't put Him off. Leave Beersheba. Head into Egypt with Him.

Are you dabbling? Are you settling? What are you going to do about it?

The scope of God's commitment to Jacob is surprisingly large. Here's something I won't make a habit of, although I'm sure you'd like me to - summing up 21 verses in a couple of sentences. vv.6-7 repeat the phrase that 'all his offspring' went to Egypt for this lifesaving journey to food, reunion and new life. vv.8-25 list the members of the family who went.

As vv.26-27 suggest in the way they try to explain 'how we came up with this list,' the list is more 'charter members' than a complete census of every person there. But the clear impression you're left with after reading this list is the completeness of the family being rescued. The scope of this life-saving rescue that God provides for Jacob that he may 'live and not perish' is not as narrow as just him, nor just him and a few others. His whole family is in God's sights.

Here's another part of the Bible that reminds us that God deals not just with individuals, but with whole families. His rescuing intent does not stop with you in the household. He has your spouse, your children and your grandchildren in mind, and in heart. He means to draw you all to belong to Him. In particular, right now, I think the Lord has something to say about the children who follow us.

It's pretty rare that I have any sense of 'The Lord says this to us...' It's not wise to make that stuff up, or pretend you're getting a word from the Lord when it's really just your preferences being given a spiritual badge. But as I've spent time in the prayer room at CYC this week, and as others have been praying and hearing from God this week and for months, I believe God is telling us this:

The God of our fathers will get to work in this place as the prayers of our children arise to Him.

Here in our passage is Jacob, who worshipped as his fathers had done before him, leading his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren on to the next adventure with God. I think we're being called to worship God as our fathers before us did, and lead our children, discipling them in prayer in particular, so that *they* might pray. Because I think God has told a few of us that He is going to bring about His purposes in Inverness as children pray to Him.

Your commitment to God, and His commitment to you, matters. Not just for you, but for the children who will follow you. Will you lead the children who are here now, or who are yet to be, in worship and obedience to the God of our fathers; will you show them the way? Or will you dabble, or settle, or leave them to do what they will?

How can we unlock the prayers of our children?