

Journeys with Jacob  
**What God does with Our Scandals**  
Genesis 28:15-30  
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church  
July 27, 2008

Rev. Melanie Lee Carey

Josh Hamilton is a Major League Baseball player for the Texas Rangers. He was the first overall pick in the 1999 Major League Baseball Draft. And you may know his name because during this year's Home Run Derby at the All-Star game, Josh hit the most home runs ever recorded in one round. 28.

But the real story about Josh is not about baseball at all, but rather about Josh's life. You see, Josh Hamilton is a drug addict and as he tells his story in a recent article in ESPN magazine, "To let you know how far I've come, let me tell you where I've been. Not that long ago, there were nights I went to sleep in strange places praying I wouldn't wake up...I prayed to be spared another day of guilt and depression and addiction. I couldn't continue living the life of a crack addict, and I couldn't stop, either. It was a horrible downward spiral that I had to pull out of, or die. I lay there -- in a hot and dirty trailer in the North Carolina countryside, in a stranger's house, in the cab of my pickup -- and prayed the Lord would take me away from the nightmare my life had become. When I think of those terrible times, there's one

memory that stands out. I was walking down the double-yellow of a two-lane country highway outside Raleigh when I woke up out of a trance.

"I was so out of it I had lost consciousness, but my body had kept going down the middle of the road, cars whizzing by on either side. I had run out of gas on my way to a drug dealer's house, and from there I left the truck and started walking. I had taken Klonopin, a prescription anti-anxiety drug, along with whatever else I was using at the time. And the combination had put me over the edge. It's the perfect example of what I was: a dead man walking. And now, as I stand on the green grass of a major league outfield or walk to the batter's box with people cheering for me, I repeatedly ask myself one simple question: How did I get here from there?

"I go to sleep every night with a clear mind and a clear conscience. Every day, I walk into an immaculate clubhouse with 10 TVs and all the food I can eat, a far cry from the rat-infested hellholes of my user past. I walk to my locker and change into a perfectly clean and pressed uniform that someone else hung up for me. I grab a bat and a glove and walk onto a beautifully manicured field to play a game for a

living. How am I here? I can only shrug and say, "It's a God thing." It's the only possible explanation." <sup>i</sup>

Although separated by many centuries of time, our ancestor in faith, Jacob and baseball player Josh Hamilton have a lot in common. Both of them come from scandal-ridden pasts and both of them are used by God for a greater purpose. It is a lesson to us about what God does with scandals. It is a lesson to us about what God does when we hand over our dysfunctions, addictions and other proverbial "dirty laundry," and trust our lives to God. It is a lesson of what happens when we trust that God can use even us.

Jacob, the younger son, stole his brother Esau's birthrights and he lied to his father, Isaac, and in today's racy text, he ends up with four wives, warring sisters, one of whom is unloved by her husband, slave women with no choices, and a father-in-law out to get ahead at his son-in-law's expense.

But the real story is that this very dysfunctional family is the beginning of something big. For it is from this very family that the people of Israel are born. The 12 sons born to Jacob and his four wives become the progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel. What's more, this less-than-

ideal family is even the beginning of the people of Christ — centuries later, when Jesus is born, for Jesus is of the tribe of Judah. And Judah is one of the sons of Jacob and the unloved wife, Leah.

Here in the first book of the Bible, we find the story of a messed-up family that, despite its troubles, is used by God to accomplish his will. So maybe we shouldn't be too quick to write off scandals, and that should even extend to our own. Lots of people grow up in problematic circumstances, and some are even inclined to blame their rocky childhood for their failure to blossom in later life. But there comes a point where, if we are to gain any kind of balance in life, we have to stop blaming and recognize that we are responsible for who we are now and what we do on a go-forward basis, regardless of how bad or even how good our upbringing was.

It's actually helpful that Genesis, this book of beginnings, presents us with a family that puts the funk in dysfunctional (actually, Genesis gives us several generations of a dysfunctional family), because it reminds us that not only can good things come from scandalous starts, but also that God can use those shaky starts to accomplish his will, as he used Jacob's family to fulfill his covenant with humankind.

Scandals, are often ragged and difficult, with long-lasting impact. And yet, they do not have to define us or doom us. In fact, whatever kind of start we had, good or bad, we can and should take responsibility for who we are *now* on a go-forward basis.

Baseball player Josh Hamilton puts it this way. "I got better for one reason: I surrendered. Instead of asking to be bailed out, instead of making deals with God by saying, "If you get me out of this mess, I'll stop doing what I'm doing," I asked for help. I wouldn't do that before.

"I'd been the Devil Rays' No. 1 pick in the 1999 draft, supposedly a five-tool prospect. I was a big, strong man, and I was supposed to be able to handle my problems myself. That didn't work out so well. Every day, I'm reminded that my story is bigger than me. It never fails. E

"Every time I go to the ballpark, I talk to people who are either battling addictions themselves or trying to help someone else who is. They remind me that this isn't really about baseball. It's amazing that God allowed me to keep my baseball talents after I sat out three years and played only 15 games last season in A-ball. I've been called the biggest surprise in baseball, and I can't argue with that. If you think about it, how many people have gone from being a crack addict to

succeeding at anything, especially something as demanding as major league baseball?

“But the way I look at it... I've been given this platform to talk about the hell I've been through, so it's almost like I need to do well, like I don't have a choice. I never forget that I'm living with addiction. It's just part of my life. I decided to be open about what happened to me; early on, I was doing long interviews before my first game in every city. It's been amazing how people have responded, and I think being honest helped. I can't avoid my past, so I don't try. I get tested three times a week, and if it comes back positive, I know I'm done with baseball for life.

“This may sound crazy, but I wouldn't change a thing about my path to the big leagues. I wouldn't even change the 26 tattoos that cover so much of my body, even though they're the most obvious signs of my life temporarily leaving the tracks. You're probably thinking, Bad decisions and addiction almost cost him his life, and he wouldn't change anything? But if I hadn't gone through all the hard times, this whole story would be just about baseball. If I'd made the big leagues

at 21 and made my first All-Star team at 23 and done all the things expected of me, I would be a big-time baseball player, and that's it.

“Baseball is third in my life right now, behind my relationship with God and my family. Without the first two, baseball isn't even in the picture. Believe me, I know... I have a mission now. My mission is to be the ray of hope, the guy who stands out there on that beautiful field and owns up to his mistakes and lets people know it's never completely hopeless, no matter how bad it seems at the time. I have a platform and a message, and now I go to bed at night, sober and happy, praying I can be a good messenger.”<sup>ii</sup>

The ancient story of Jacob as well as the modern day tale of baseball's Josh Hamilton remind us all that the purpose of God is somehow at work in the places of scandal and deception. Precisely in these doubtful characters the promises of God are being fulfilled. Therefore, we have no reason to doubt that God can also accomplish God's will with us and our world as well. No matter what our scandals may be.

So let us take responsibility for who we are now. Insofar as we use our past scandals as an excuse, we need to let it go. Insofar as it can

make us instruments of empathy and compassion let us embrace it.

And may we seek the help of our God as we move ahead.

---

<sup>i</sup> Hamilton, Josh, "I'm proof that hope is never lost." ESPN Magazine as told to Tim . updated July 5, 2007 see also: <http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=2926447>

<sup>ii</sup> IBID