

“The Gate of Heaven”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Genesis 28:10-19a Sermon
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Hearing this passage on its own today creates a bit of a sense that this journey and this dream happened in isolation: Jacob took a trip, fell asleep, had a dream, encountered and was blessed by God, awoke full of awe and blessed the place, end of story. Dreams have a way of suspending or even altering reality, I think. But, as in our own lives, we realize that these events *must* have occurred within the context of Jacob’s life, his identity and relationships, at that particular moment in time. And indeed, they did.

Jacob, as we know, was twin brother to Esau, but apparently no *identical* twin. For Jacob was soft and smooth, preferred to be inside, and was favored by his mother. By contrast, Esau was hairy, tough, and outdoorsy; a hunter and his father’s son. Although Esau was the firstborn, they said that Jacob emerged from the womb grasping his elder brother’s heel, trying to catch up even in birth. So began a classic tale of sibling rivalry, a competition which would mature and escalate into outright manipulation and deceit: When a famished Esau wanted nothing more than a bowl of stew, Jacob would only sell it to him for the price of Esau’s coveted birthright as firstborn son. In that moment, hunger won out, but regret and resentment would kick in shortly thereafter...

Later, as their father Isaac lay blind and dying, mother Rebekah would scheme with Jacob to trick Isaac into bestowing Esau’s firstborn blessing upon Jacob. Although Jacob’s voice could not be disguised, goat’s fur on his hands and chest and the smells of sweat and the outdoors were sufficient to the task.

By the time Isaac realized he had spoken to the wrong son, it was too late. The blessing had been conferred and could not be retracted. It is shortly after this second deception that we

encounter Jacob in the wilderness. Fearing the cost of his brother's wrath, their mother sent him packing in search of a new life and wife amidst her side of the family many miles away. There he would presumably be safe. But he had to get there first. And so here we find Jacob a fugitive, alone in the limbo of "a certain place," an unknown, unfamiliar, in-between place where even a blanket couldn't be had, where a rock had to fill in for a pillow. You know it's bad when...

It's not clear whether Jacob had the conscience to experience guilt around what he had stolen from his brother or how brazenly he had deceived his father. We can perhaps surmise from his speedy departure that he knew enough to fear for his life and to grasp that he wasn't exactly the most popular guy in town. But, beyond that, Jacob's level of self awareness does not appear to have been especially well developed. And so it is left to us to note in retrospect that, quite frankly, this Jacob whom father and God alike had blessed, couldn't have been much more undeserving. Clearly he was bright and ambitious, but also covetous, misguided, selfish, and disloyal. Seemingly not very promising material from which to craft a patriarch. And rather rocky soil in which to plant seeds of hope and redemption.

And so we might wonder what God was thinking when revealing God's self to Jacob in a dream, then making extravagant promises of land and progeny, presence and safety, and, perhaps most shocking of all, blessings to all the families of the earth to be received through Jacob himself and his many offspring. Surely there must have been a more respectable, better qualified patriarchal candidate out there somewhere? Perhaps even the true firstborn, Esau?...But could it also be that God saw something different in Jacob's raw materials? That, while not overlooking his rather glaring flaws, God identified and illuminated the promise tucked deep within? And, in that fertile patch of Jacob's being, sowed the seeds?

As a firstborn child myself, this story has always been a little bit hard for me to swallow. I can't help but identify with Esau and experience a sense of injustice on his behalf. For God to now join the party and bless that rogue Jacob too, now that just seems beyond unfair. And the text really heightens and reinforces that feeling. When Isaac refuses to retract his erroneous blessing, declaring it too late, Esau cries out in agony, "Have you only one blessing, father?" Esau does manage to eke another blessing out of his dad. But it is one that may feel more like a curse: Sending him to a barren land and rendering him his brother's servant, the light at the end of the tunnel being that he would one day break loose from that yoke... Truth be told, it is the human beings who have written into the story a sense of scarcity--There can only be one eldest son, one birthright, one blessing, one promised land. There is simply not enough of anything to go around.—It is this particular philosophy that has driven this fierce competition and so many others besides. An ethos that encourages a limited number of people to feel special, entitled even, and sentences the rest to chronic underdog status.

That would seem to be the world we live in today. It's hard to ignore the fact that multiple wars, a sour economy, and increasingly heated dialogues around same sex marriage have drawn ever sharper lines between the "haves" and the "have nots," the blessed and the cursed. And yet, this is merely the earthly, human illusion and does not represent the real promise of God's realm, the vision that lives in the heart and the mind of God, which has begun and will one day be completely fulfilled. We catch glimpses of it in recent history, such as the growing number of states that have adopted same sex marriage laws. We catch it in the words of the prophets, from Amos to Martin Luther King, Jr. We catch it in the life and ministry of Jesus. And we catch it here, in this ancient story of sibling rivalry and redemption. Indeed, there is radical hope present in the very fact that God was able to create a great nation out of Jacob, a conniving criminal. But

it is also important to know that Esau went on to prosper and father a nation, to forgive his brother and move on with his life with no yoke of hostility nor servitude around his neck. In actuality, there *was* more than enough for everyone.

Which brings us back to Jacob and his dream. It's amazing that he was able to enter REM sleep at all, lying as he was exposed to the elements with a rock for a pillow. But he must have been exhausted after a long day on the road filled with anxiety that his brother might well pursue him for revenge. The night was dark already, and so he chose any old place to lay his head. And he entered that most vulnerable place of sleep. This nondescript, coincidental space was surely an unlikely place for an angel-filled ladder--or more accurately a stairway--to heaven to materialize. An unlikely place for God to make an appearance to an undeserving man. In that moment, Jacob woke up to the presence of God, proclaiming, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" He woke up to awe and wonder and humility. He woke up to the sacred, exclaiming, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And so in that moment he ritually marked the occasion by turning his stony pillow into a pillar and pouring oil over it. And he recognized it for all time by renaming the place "Bethel" or "House of God."

It may have been that the former city of Luz was once, like Jacob, a diamond in the rough, which required the eyes and the heart of God to acknowledge it into its true identity, "House of God."

It may also be that, when we are open and vulnerable and paying attention, we can perceive that any and all people and places play host to God. That God's presence is incarnated throughout all of creation. That God's angels—helpers and messengers—are ascending and descending ladders all over the place carrying out God's work.

We've talked here before about the Celtic concept of "thin places"—places where a sense of the sacred is physically palpable. For some it may be a particular, scenic place, a particular church sanctuary, or a particular location where something very special occurred—perhaps an epiphany, an engagement, or a birth. For me personally, Santa Fe always feels like sacred ground, and Manhattan's Cathedral of St. John the Divine never fails to reduce me to spirit-filled tears. For you that sacred place and the experience may be something entirely different. We are certainly blessed to have special spaces to go to experience the awesomeness of God's presence. Yet we can be even more blessed if we slow down and see that the potential for gates of heaven is in fact everywhere and in every time.

I remember during my brief stint in a hospital interning as a chaplain, my supervisor asked me to visit a patient who had been hospitalized for the suicidal effects of her alcoholism. "Ask her where God is in her alcoholism," she helpfully suggested. I couldn't help but translate her words into my own deeply embedded, evangelical language and cringe. Was I supposed to be suggesting that God had afflicted this woman with her addiction as a teachable moment? Was I supposed to be suggesting that her hospitalization was punishment for her sin of addiction? I didn't buy into any of this and simply couldn't do it... With the help of a few more years' distance from my evangelical past and texts like this one, I now have a better understanding of what it was that she actually meant. Like Jacob struggling to sleep in a wilderness so inhospitable as to have provided only a rock for a pillow, there is space in the scary, in-between places of our lives to reach out and encounter God in our midst. To be guided and comforted, awed and empowered, to learn about ourselves and, finally, to grow.

Whatever our situations, no matter how dire or regrettable or even shameful, God is not only present with us, but, indeed, God is there rooting *for* us. God wants us all to win, though perhaps not always in the ways we might anticipate. God is the ultimate cheerleader and the ultimate gardener, inviting us to wake up to the presence and the possibility, the blessings, that exist for each one of us in every time and place.

Amen.