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Genesis 28:10-19a

The Presence of the Lord

Hear now these words from Genesis chapter 28.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. Our story starts off simply... Jacob, the son of Isaac, is on a journey. And much like his grandfather Abraham, this journey will have many contours and meanderings, some high points and some decidedly low points along the way. While Jacob is traveling light with respect to provisions- not even a pillow to rest his head on - he is heavily laden with proverbial baggage, an emotional and mental anguish playlist that will accompany both his days of walking and his nights of restless sleep.

You see Jacob hasn't left the home of his parents Isaac and Rebekah under the best of circumstances. Jacob and twin brother Esau have been battling their whole lives to be the top dog in the family - the one to receive the benefits of being the first born - the heir, rather than the spare, so to speak. Esau came out of the womb first, but Jacob extorts the birthright from Esau. Esau was a hunter and Jacob more of a homebody. One day Esau came back from a hunting trip exhausted and starving and asked his brother for some of the soup he was cooking. And Jacob, thrilled his brother was home safe, piled the rich and steamy lentil soup into a big bowl and fed his brother.... Well except he didn't. Jacob told Esau he had to first sell his birthright to him and then he would give him some food. And Esau did, saying what good is a birthright if he was going to starve to death. So Jacob got the birthright. This was a big deal. While all the sons received some of their father's property, the firstborn received a double

portion and became the leader of the family. So while this was a big deal, it wasn't quite enough. Jacob also needed his father's blessing. And again he uses shady means to get it, this time with the help of his mother Rebekah.

Ahhh Rebekah... Rebekah - bless her heart as they would say in the South, Rebekah had a favorite son. Jacob was just the apple of her eye from the day he and Esau were born. While Esau and his dad Isaac bonded over hunting and the outdoors, Rebekah preferred Jacob. In fact, the writer of Genesis is quite direct: in chapter 25:27-28 we hear "When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob." You might as well cue the foreboding music, because with a statement like that, you know there is more drama ahead. And in fact, Rebekah connives to have Jacob receive the blessing from a now aged Isaac. Isaac directs Esau to bring him some of the savory meats he loves so much and then he will give Esau his blessing. Rebekah overhears this request and convinces Jacob to bring his father food and pretend to be Esau. There are multiple layers of duplicity - which could either be funny or sad depending on your perspective - but in the end the trickery works and Jacob receives the blessing from his father. Now you can imagine Esau is none too pleased about this, and he threatens to kill his brother. Rebekah is told about Esau's plans and again intervenes to protect Jacob. She tells Jacob he should leave to go live at his Uncle Laban's house in Haran until things cool down.

But Rebekah has a problem. She can't tell her husband Isaac the real reason why Jacob is leaving. Rebekah would have to confess to her part in the plot to steal the blessing for Jacob and who knows what might happen. Well conveniently for Rebekah and Jacob, Esau has been busy marrying two of the local Canaanite women - Hittite women - rather than women from their own clan. Rebekah knows that Isaac doesn't want this for Jacob and in a very dramatic scene, Rebekah tells her husband that her life will not be worth living if Jacob marries a Hittite. So Isaac calls Jacob, blesses and charges him saying, "You shall not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May God give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you..."

So Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. And while he may not have had many provisions with him, he was carrying a lot of baggage. Baggage of trickery and deceit, of duplicitous interactions with his father and brother, of anger and bitterness. This is not the story of someone on adventure trek, nor the story of someone responding to God's call to serve. This is a story of someone fleeing from a tough spot in his life. A spot partially of his own making, for although he was used as a pawn by his mother to receive his father's blessing, Jacob initiated the stealing of his brother's birthright. So here we have Jacob, not completely innocent and also not completely responsible. This is the place we sometimes end up in life - a messy muddle of internal and external conflict swirling in and around us. Yes - we need to ask for forgiveness for our part of the messy saga, and yes we need to grant forgiveness to

those who have used us to advance their cause. This messy drama of life is played out in the dream the Jacob has after he falls asleep.

“...And Jacob dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” One of the Hebrew midrash commentaries for this verse fleshes out the ambivalent place in which Jacob found himself. The *Genesis Rabbah* shares, “The messengers going up the steps were singing the praises of Jacob, while those who were coming down were leaping and dancing and saying terrible things about him, said some rabbis.”¹ Now as far as I can tell from reading way too many websites, this scripture is not the origin of Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven*. It is the origin, however, of the beloved song I learned as a child “*We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*”...We are climbing Jacob’s ladder...”Ev’ry round goes higher, higher,...Ev’ry round goes higher, higher, Ev’ry round goes higher, higher,..Children of the Lord.”²

Children of the Lord...that, my friends, how Jacob is seen by God – where God meets Jacob and where God meets each one us. As a precious child. Into the comings and the goings, into the tumult and turmoil, into the ambivalence and the unknown, Jacob encounters God.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He encountered a **certain place** and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. And Jacob took one of the stones of that **certain place**, put it under his head, and slept in that **particular place**. As a commentator has noted, when we hear this story, we often miss the repetition of the characteristics of the place where Jacob slept. It was not any old place by the side of the road, a convenient hotel with easy highway access or a posh hotel and a room with a view. No – it was “The Place.” The Hebrew word used has *gravitas* – it emphasizes particularity and “suggests that something extraordinary is about to happen in that certain spot.”³ And friends something extraordinary happens. God shows up. God makes God presence known.

And the Lord stood beside Jacob and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

¹ Genesis Rabbah 68:11 as quoted in Michael E. Williams and John C. Holbert (eds.) *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Volume One. Genesis*. Abingdon Press, 1991; p143.

² Traditional African-American spiritual. Hymnary.org list the final words of each verse as “Soldiers of the cross.” I learned it as “Children of the Lord.” https://hymnary.org/text/we_are_climbing_jacobs_ladder_we_are_cli

³ Michael E. Williams and John C. Holbert (eds.) *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Volume One. Genesis*. Abingdon Press, 1991; p141; Additional insight from David J.A. Clines (ed.) *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.4, Oaktree Software.

Into the comings and the goings, into the tumult and turmoil, into the ambivalence and the unknown, Jacob encounters God. Jacob understands God's presence in a real sense – maybe for the first time understanding what it meant when his father Isaac blessed him with the words, “May God give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you.” The light bulb goes off and Jacob gets what it means that he has received the same blessing as his grandfather Abraham. God is present with him on this journey of life in a very real way.

What Jacob learned at this particular place and will continue to learn (as he will have many more lessons ahead) is that God is always present, but that he needs to leave space in his life so he can encounter God. Jacob has spent his life thus far trying to control the world around him; to take the birthright and blessing from his brother Esau through manipulative and deceptive means. Rather than letting his life unfold, Jacob, with a little help from his mother, decides that he knows a better way. I think about all of the times in my life when I don't just think – I am sure – that I know a better way. Just ask my two younger brothers or Brian. So much of our life is spent trying to control – to tame – the world around us. And because we can't control the big things, we become masters of controlling the small stuff. We rid our yards of weeds that make it look unkempt; we rid our libraries of books that challenge the tidiness of our lives; we rid our society of people whose understanding how they are created in the image of God defies the boxes we have so neatly designated.

“The driving cultural force of that life we call “modern” is the idea, the hope and desire, that we can make the world *controllable*. Yet it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive. A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world.”⁴ So says, Hartmut Rosa, a German professor of sociology in his book *The Uncontrollability of the World*. I started reading this book in preparation for the Adult Ed I am leading on the book of Revelation. Spoiler alert – one of the reasons Revelation has been so popular in the media is because we are uncomfortable with Jesus words, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man will come.”⁵ We want to know the day and hour (and likely the second) when Jesus will return.

“Yet it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive.” This is where Jacob finds himself, in the place he names Bethel, literally the “house of God.” Fleeing from a life where control was the name of the game to **the place** where the uncontrollable happens. Jacob experienced the presence of the Lord and he felt touched, moved and alive. I can hear him in my head, exclaiming, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Jacob experienced the presence of the Lord while alone, on the road, fleeing a home life that had deep fractures; on the road to new possibilities. Sometimes that is where we experience

⁴ Hartmut Rosa. *The Uncontrollability of the World*. English edition Polity Press, 2020; p2.

⁵ Matthew 25:13

the Lord's presence. On the road betwixt and between. And yet our scripture this morning ends with Jacob ritualizing his experience. Not only did he name the location – Bethel -Jacob took the stone that had been under his head and anointed it with oil, marking it as dedicated to God. Many years later, Jacob returned to Bethel and built an altar to God there and Bethel became one of the main worship centers in Israel. For a period of time during the era of the Judges, the ark of covenant was kept there. God often sent prophets to preach at Bethel. People would come to Bethel to seek God in times of trouble. A house of God for the people... surely the presence of the Lord is in this place where community gathers.

I think about one of the formative experiences of my faith where I experienced the presence of the Lord in community. On Mondays at noon we met for *Lectio Divina* at First Presbyterian, Shreveport Louisiana. We were a motley crew: a retired doctor with early stage Alzheimer's Disease, a church hopper and shopper, the mother of an Episcopalian priest, the woman straining to hold on to the Old South, the woman struggling between a calling of grandmothering and teaching, and me. Often one of the associate pastors would join in – especially if he was up for preaching that week.

“What word or phrase is speaking to you today?” “What it is in your life that this word or phrase seems to be addressing?” “What does God seem to be telling you to do or change?” We repeated the instructions every week before we read the scripture because we feared the Holy Spirit wouldn't move in us unless we were decent and in order.

Week after week after week, the Creator would reveal to me a new path to mercy, a fresh expression of grace, and unquenchable faith through my fellow bruised and broken souls. The eternal truth that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts would be revealed yet again, for I experienced the presence of the Lord when I least expected it. Sometimes when the suffering and humiliation of the cross was all I could see in my life, I would get a resurrection gift of hope from another's view of the same text. Sometimes the Spirit would expose the thin places in our lives, and prophecy would flow like the mighty waters and I would come away drenched by the possibility of the Word. Sometimes I would hear bits and pieces of our combined stories in the sermon on Sunday. The personal became the communal in beautiful, spirit-filled moments.

Jacob didn't expect to meet the Lord that night in Bethel. Jacob's tightly controlled life unwound, and what emerged was a recognition that he belonged to God, that the promises made to his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham were made to him as well. From this personal experience of God, Jacob birthed a place where others experienced the presence of God, a recognition that the presence of the Lord is both personal and communal. In my heart of hearts I believe that what we are called to here at PCO. To be a place where the presence of the Lord is deeply felt – deeply experienced - personally and communally. To be a place where the unexpected, uncontrollable movements of the spirit are met with the exuberance of Jacob. “How awesome is this place! This church, PCO, is none other than the house of God.” May it be so. Amen.