

7-19-26 sermon

Genesis 28.10-22

For those of you who follow the Lectionary closely, you'll have noticed that I kept reading the text beyond where the Lectionary ends. The *assigned* reading ends in verse 19a, "He called that place Bethel." But the story continues for a couple more verses till the end of the chapter, with the vow that Jacob makes. Similarly, if you're here next week, you'll notice that I will continue reading beyond the point at which the Lectionary ends again. I'm curious why the Lectionary didn't finish either the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel, or the story of Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Just a couple more verses in each case, but they're left out. Things that make me go, "hmmmmmm."

Well, since last week, when we heard how Jacob gained Esau's birthright, a lot has happened. The twins' father, Isaac, is close to death and sends for Esau to give him the blessing as his firstborn. But first he tells him to go hunt, and bring him some of that delicious game he loves. Rebekah tells Jacob to pretend to be his twin brother, and steal his father's blessing for himself. Which he does. And when the distraught Esau realizes he's lost all that comes with being the firstborn, he vows to kill Jacob once their father has died. Rebekah catches wind of Esau's intentions, and sends Jacob away, telling Isaac that Jacob needs to go and find a wife from among her relatives, just as he himself had done. Isaac agrees, and as the mother and her favorite son say their tearful goodbyes, she tells him that some day in the distant future, when Esau forgets his anger, she'll send for him, so he can come home. Which I'm thinking is probably *not* going to happen!

So, Jacob leaves – alone – and heads towards his uncle Laban's home in Haran, back to the very place where his grandfather Abraham's story begins. As the sun sets, and the stars begin to appear, Jacob lies down, using a large stone for a pillow. As you do, when in the desert. And he has the famous dream: "Jacob's ladder." A story that has featured in countless bible coloring books, children's songs, and which provides the name for a high voltage climbing arc machine popular in physics classes and in those old "mad scientist" movies. Sadly, for all those children's books, and for John August Swanson, the artist who painted the cover image, a better translation of the word – and image – is "ramp" rather than "ladder." The kind of ramp that featured in ancient temples, including the ziggurats of Babylon. But, as "Jacob's ramp" isn't as poetic as "Jacob's ladder," I imagine we're not going to change that image in popular imagination any time soon! But the "ramp" reference is important, as it makes explicit something that "ladder" does not: here is a place where heaven meets earth – on earth. Not a ladder from down here to up there. Yes: the image of the angels ascending and descending is explicit, making the connection between heaven and earth. But it's a temple – something earthbound – and so we shouldn't be surprised to read immediately after the description of the angels, "And the LORD stood beside him and said..."

In his dream, Jacob sees the angels ascending and descending the ramp, but the LORD is standing next to him, and what Jacob hears the LORD say is the same as what the LORD said to his father and grandfather before him:

“I’m giving you this land, and will make of you a great nation,
and through your descendants, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed.”

But then God makes Jacob a promise exclusive to him:

“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 promised you.”

And then Jacob wakes from his dream and declares, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!” But why would he know it? He’s in the middle of nowhere. Not even in a grove of sacred trees, let alone any kind of temple. He’s running away in fear for his life. He’s all alone, vulnerable to wild animals and bandits. Jacob’s waking life at this moment must be dominated by fear, loneliness, and maybe even a little guilt. If he was going to have any kind of dream in this place, you would think it would be his sub-conscious bubbling up with some kind of nightmarish image inspired by that fear, and loneliness and guilt.

Some of us know something about those kinds of dreams.

Sometimes they’re waking dreams, when something triggers a memory tied to past fear, or guilt or shame, and it’s like we’re right back there, as the feelings wash over us. But the dream that Jacob has is not a review of his shameful *past*: it’s a dream of an alternative *future* – with God. Even though he’s just cheated his twin brother and deceived their father and is on the run in fear for his life, God comes to him and makes the exact same promise to him as God did to his father and grandfather. And as if that wasn’t enough, God makes an additional promise to him: to be with him, and to *keep* him. And, with that word, the Cain and Abel story makes an appearance once again. The first story about sibling conflict, which actually *did* end in murder. When God comes to Cain to ask him where his brother is, Cain replies,

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Centuries later, the psalmist will be inspired to write these words: “I will lift up my eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord. He who keeps you will not slumber, he who keeps Israel – Jacob – will not slumber, nor sleep.”

“I am with you, and I will keep you.”

That’s quite the promise to quite the problematic figure, made in quite the dream! Jacob’s response is made in wakefulness, but it is not, “And Jacob was relieved, and worshiped the God of Abraham and Isaac.” No, it is, “And he was afraid” – still! – and said, “How awesome,” or, better, “how *fearful* is this place!” “This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven.” A temple – where heaven meets earth. Then he turned his pillow into a pillar, and called that place Bet-el – “the house of God.” And there the Lectionary ends.

But not the story.

Because, having received these astounding – and probably, unexpected – promises from God, Jacob “made a vow,” albeit a very conditional one! “*If God will* be with me, and will keep me, and provide for my needs so that one day I *can* return home in peace like momma told me I would, *then* the LORD shall be my God, and this pillow/pillar shall be God’s house. *And* I’ll give you ten percent of everything you give me!” God makes the same promises to Jacob as God had to his father and grandfather, and Jacob’s response is to say, “Uh, let’s wait and see shall we? But hey, if you *do* do that all that, then you will be my God. *And* I’ll give you a ten percent tip, I mean, tithe.” There’s a certain amount of arrogance in that “vow,” right? “Let’s see if you can make good on your promise, God, and if you do, well, then I guess the God of my fathers can be my God too.” Maybe that’s why the Lectionary stopped at, “He called the place Bethel” and skipped over this part of the story.

Maybe.

The image that came to mind when I pondered the end of this story this week, was part of Michelangelo’s masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: the depiction of God creating Adam. Where God is straining to reach his hand towards the first human, muscles sharply depicted in the outstretched arm. While Adam casually drapes his arm on his knee and extends his hand, wrist flopped almost disdainfully. If he extended his finger, he could touch God’s own outstretched finger, but it’s almost like he can’t quite commit himself to make the connection. Much like Jacob can’t quite commit himself to the God who reached out to him through a dream and makes these wonderful promises. *Without asking anything of Jacob in return!* And Jacob’s response – alone in the wilderness, on the run because of his brother’s threat to kill him, vulnerable and fearful – is to say, “*If you do all that, then you can be my God.*”

Now, I want to be all kinds of judgmental about Jacob’s so-called “vow,” but, if I’m honest, I recognize I’ve not been above making those kinds of promises to God in my own life. Maybe you have to. “God, if you’ll just do...” Whatever it is, “Then I’ll be a better person. I’ll read my Bible more. I’ll have a quiet time.”

“If you get me out of this mess I’ve made...”

This fix I’m in...

That terrible thing I said...

That split-section decision I made which I regret so much...

Or, “If you’ll get me that job, that college admission, that spouse...” “If you’ll heal that person I love...” “Then you’ll be my God.” Maybe you’ve prayed one of those kinds of prayers. More than once, in some cases. Maybe you haven’t. But this story is an early example of humanity’s relationship to God. God is all in with us – but we rarely respond in kind. God continues to come to meet us exactly where we are, and often we respond like Michelangelo’s Adam, a floppy wrist, finger held just short of God’s outstretched arm.

God became one of us, for us, in the person of Jesus. Stretching out *his* hand to touch those deemed unclean. To lift up a woman whose life was threatened by the self-righteous. To heal, to feed, to comfort. And in response we stretched out his hands on a cross.

So maybe that's why the Lectionary ends where it does.

Keeping the focus on God. Portraying us in our best light. The kind of spirituality we're more comfortable with, perhaps. But – and I'll say it again – the fact that the story doesn't end here, but continues with Jacob kinda stiff-arming God and saying, "I'd like to wait and see if you'll come through for me before I commit to you," is exactly why I find the scriptures trustworthy. And also makes room for the kind of faith I sometimes have. The faith that so often responds to God's unconditional love and grace conditionally. The sovereign God binds Godself to this treacherous fugitive without requiring Jacob do the same. And Jacob says, "Let's see if you'll keep these promises before I'll bind myself to you." God doesn't hit the 'smite' button. Or say, "You ungrateful wretch." God simply waits to see if this grasping, deceitful, fearful, exiled man will one day embrace the God of his father and his grandfather. And *become* a blessing to all the other families of the world.

That same God extends a hand to us. Makes the same promise,

"I will be with you... even to the end of the age.

How will you and I respond?