

## A LADDER SET UPON THE EARTH Genesis 28:10-19

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 23, 2017, the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."*

---

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards 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 ladder 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; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.*

### I.

This summer the sermons I am giving come from passages in the Book of Genesis designated by the lectionary for the Sundays on which I preach them. So far in this series

- We have looked at the story of creation<sup>1</sup>
- Hagar and Ishmael<sup>2</sup>
- Isaac and Rebekah<sup>3</sup>
- And last week the beginnings of the conflict between Jacob and Esau when they fight one another in the womb even prior to their birth.<sup>4</sup>

Today we follow Jacob in an early part of his adult life. When today's story opens:

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1-2:4a.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 24:34-38, 42-29, 58-67.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 25:19-28.

- Jacob has already tricked his older twin Esau into handing over his birthright<sup>5</sup> and has stolen Esau's blessing by fooling their blind and aging father.<sup>6</sup>
- In response, Esau vows – Cain-like – to kill Jacob. Their mother Rebekah warns Jacob to flee and their father Isaac says “You need to find a wife as well, so you can produce an heir to inherit the family promise.”
- Thus, Isaac and Rebecca tell Jacob to leave their home in Beersheba and journey to Haran (a city in the not yet received Promised Land).<sup>7</sup>
- On the journey, Jacob comes to a certain place and notices a sudden and premature fall of night. He who has heretofore only lived in tents finds a nearby rock, places it under his head, and under the open night sky, sleeps.
- Jacob dreams of a ladder resting upon the earth and stretching into heaven, from which angels ascend to heaven and descend to earth.
- In his dream Jacob receives a promise from God that has been given to his grandparents and parents: namely, the promise of land, descendants, and blessings for his family line, a promise now stamped through this dream with his name on it.
- And in his dream, perhaps above all else, the newly journeying Jacob receives a promise that God will be with him at all times. The beauty of these words is worth hearing again. God says:

Know that I am with you  
And will keep you  
Wherever you go,  
And will bring you  
Back to the land;  
For I will not leave you  
Until I have done  
What I have promised you.

It is a beautiful blessing for anyone; let alone for a person leaving home for the first time.

- Jacob awakens and exclaims to the stars:

Surely the Lord is in this place  
And I did not know it!

- The narrator then tells us that Jacob is afraid, but Jacob is still able to say: “How awesome is this place.”
- Jacob builds an altar to commemorate the place and names it Bethel, which means “house of God.”

\*\*

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 25:29-34.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 27:1-40.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 27:41-46.

The children's song Molly will sing in a few minutes provides a Christianized version of this passage, with a focus on the ladder:

We are climbing Jacob's ladder,  
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,  
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,  
Soldiers of the cross.

Ev'ry round goes higher, higher,  
Ev'ry round goes higher, higher,  
Ev'ry round goes higher, higher,  
Soldiers of the cross.

Children, do you love my Jesus?  
Children, do you love my Jesus?  
Children, do you love my Jesus?  
Soldiers of the cross.<sup>8</sup>

## II.

In studying for this sermon this week, I found no less than fifteen aspects of the story of Jacob's dream on which I could preach. There are probably more. But let me dwell briefly on three elements of the story. These elements are not immediately apparent when we first read or hear the story, but they are embedded within the subtleties of the Hebrew language in which the story was written. They have been uncovered by scholars and teachers who have poured over these texts for centuries, first by candle light and much later under electric lights.

Each of these elements render this story worthy of "stopping by woods on a snowing evening" to ponder both "promises [we have] to keep" and the "miles to go before [we] sleep."<sup>9</sup>

Let us pray: *Lord give us the capacity to hear this text in all its richness and may it become "God's word to us." Amen.*

### (a)

The first element that emerges for me in this story is "Praying in the Dark."

- When the English translation reads Jacob "*came to* a certain place and stayed there for the night," the word translated "came to" can actually mean "collided with," for as one scholar writes, the word suggests "a dynamic object that is traveling toward oneself."<sup>10</sup>
- This sense of suddenness is reinforced by the second line – "because the sun *had* set." This is pluperfect tense, meaning an action that had started and been completed in the past. A more normal way of narrating would have been: "The sun set and Jacob stayed there for the night."

---

<sup>8</sup> "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," African-American Spiritual, author unknown.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, © 1969 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc., renewed 1951, by Robert Frost. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42891/stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening>.

<sup>10</sup> Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 187.

- But both by using the pluperfect tense and the verb meaning “collide,” the narrator is setting a scene in which Jacob is traveling late afternoon, expecting a couple of more hours of sunlight, when suddenly night comes upon him and he is forced to stop exactly where he is. The force of the action is “palpable but mysterious.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus Jacob – whom Genesis has previously described as a mild man secure in the tents of home<sup>12</sup> – is outside, at night, sleeping with his head on a rock in a mysterious place, in which God has suddenly caused darkness to descend and has an encounter with God through a dream about a ladder.

As Jacob responds to his dream, he becomes the first human being in the Bible to pray in the dark.<sup>13</sup> One ancient Jewish scholar writes:

[It is as if God has turned out the lights,] so as to speak to Jacob alone, like a king who calls for the lights to be extinguished, as he wishes to speak to his friend in private.<sup>14</sup>

\*\*

Over the years, I have heard several parents say: “Some of the best conversations I have had with my kids, particularly when they were teenagers, were in the car.” Sometimes the driving was at night; sometimes, at day; but the parents came to realize that there is a certain privacy and closeness that leads being in the closed and confined space of the car can lend itself to important and intimate conversation.

This is true for more than parents and teenagers.

- Think of the bull sessions you had in college, and how many of them were in the confined space of a dorm room, with the darkness of night.
- Think of the people who have fallen in love in the confined space of a walk at night.
- Think of the value of conversation, late at night, two heads on a pillow, looking upward, darkness covering the room.

It can be the same with prayer. God turns the lights out on Jacob because he wants a long and deep conversation with the chosen one at the outset of his journey. And Jacob responds.

Jacob was thus *the first human being to pray in the dark*.

(b)

A second element of this passage is “The Significance of Place.” In the ten short verses of our passage, the word *place* appears six times.

- Jacob...came to *a certain place* and stayed there for the night...
- Taking one of the stones of *the place*, he put it under his head and lay down in *that place*.

---

<sup>11</sup>Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 271.

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 25:27.

<sup>13</sup> Zornberg, “Genesis,” 187.

<sup>14</sup> Zornberg, “Genesis,” 187.

- Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in *this place*, and I did not know it!’
- And [Jacob] said...said; “How awesome is *this place*!”
- He called *that place* Bethel [which means “The House of God.”]

In Jewish tradition, the word for place – *makom* – can even be a metaphor for God.<sup>15</sup>

Jewish tradition believes it to be the place in which Jacob halts and dreams to be Mt. Moriah.

- It is the *place* where Abraham (Jacob’s grandfather) nearly sacrificed Isaac (Jacob’s father), thus a *place* of fear and pain.<sup>16</sup>
- It is believed to be the *place* where centuries later the Temple was built, a place of sacrifice, purity, worship, pilgrimage.<sup>17</sup>

As Jacob says: “*How awesome is this place.*”

\*\*\*

The centrality of place in this story can lead us to ask:

- What *places* are central to our lives?
- What are the *places* to which we must journey to be reminded of who God is and who we are.
- In what *places* have we received the promise that God will be with us in *whatever places* we go?
- And are there *places* of pain in our past to which we need to journey to find reconciliation and peace?

\*\*\*

I once knew a man named Curt whose father had been shot down flying an AC47D “Spooky” Gunship over Laos on Christmas Eve 1965.

Curt was a toddler at the time.

In 1977, twelve years later, his father’s status was changed from Missing in Action to Killed in Action.

His mother remarried and Curt’s stepfather raised him during his teenage years.

When I knew Curt in the mid 1990s, he was in his mid thirties, a father of two girls, and over thirty years had passed since his father’s plane had gone down on Christmas Eve.

Curt had questions, and he made a long considered trip to Southeast Asia searching for answers: perhaps a crash site, remains, or the slender chance that his father was still alive.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Zornberg, “Genesis,” 187.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 22:2; Zornberg, “Genesis,” 187.

<sup>17</sup> II Chronicles 3:1; Zornberg, “Genesis,” 183.

<sup>18</sup> Official accounts of this are found at <https://www.pownetwork.org/bios/e/e014.htm>.

Curt returned from his trip with few answers, no remains, and no sixty something father found and free, but my sense was that visiting the *place* where his father had disappeared – though painful – brought Curt a measure of peace.

Several years later, in 2001, a crash site was identified, and over a decade later, in 2012, remains were found, and all six crew members – including Curt’s father – were buried at Arlington Cemetery, on July 9, 2012.

Perhaps Curt was able to say – as Jacob said in his place of pain: “*Surely, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.*”

(c)

The final theme is less subtle but equally profound. I label it “Leaving Home to Find Home.”

So far in Genesis, every major character has left home.

- Abraham and Sarah listen to the voice of God and set out, at age 75, for a land that God would promise to show them when they came close to it.<sup>19</sup>
- Later, a servant who has been instructed by God, escorts Isaac to the place he encounters Rebekah, who upon their marriage becomes an agent of healing for Isaac.<sup>20</sup>

As a third generation of Patriarch, Jacob also leaves home.

- Yet in his case, there is no divine prompting. His father simply says “You need to find a wife”;<sup>21</sup> and his mother says “Your brother is trying to kill you.”<sup>22</sup>
- On the first night Jacob is away from home he is stopped dead in his tracks by darkness, sleeps on stone, dreams of a ladder, receives a promise of God’s presence, and names the *place* “The House of God.”

As Avivah Zornberg writes: “In order to find the house of Israel, [Jacob] leaves his parents’ house.”<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes, in order to find the house of God, we simply have to leave the house in which we were raised, or at least significant patterns within it.

If we will read the remainder of Jacob’s story in Genesis, Jacob’s journey is only beginning. It will entail, over twenty years, four wives, thirteen children,<sup>24</sup> and a wrestling match with an angel that leaves Jacob with a permanent limp.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 12:1-4.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 24:1-68.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 28:1-5.

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 27:41-46.

<sup>23</sup> Zornberg, “Genesis,” 183.

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 29:31-30:24 chronicles Jacob’s attempt to have children through Rachel, while Leah and the servants of each (Bilhah and Zilpah respectively) are quite fertile. See also Genesis 35:16-26.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 32:22-32.

But after all that, Jacob will reconcile with his brother Esau<sup>26</sup> and return to the home he had to leave to find the home awaiting him.<sup>27</sup>

“In order to find the house of God, we sometimes have to leave our parents’ house.”

Good people of Westminster:  
Whether it is daylight or darkness,  
Whether you are home,  
In the process of leaving home,  
Or returning home,  
Whether you are estranged from your family  
Or as close as you have ever been with them:  
May you know that the Lord is with you,  
And may the Lord take you – Jacob like – to your true home:  
And when you arrive,  
May you recognize it  
With the joy and wonder  
That came to Jacob.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA.

---

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 33:1-17.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 35:1-15.