

“Surely The Lord is in this Place”

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A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

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Genesis 28:10-19a

Do you remember meeting Jacob?

I remember meeting him in the old campfire song. “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, we are climbing Jacob’s ladder...”

Jacob was Abraham’s grandson, the second born son of Isaac and Rebekah. When Jacob was born, he came out of the womb grabbing at the heel of his brother, Esau. That alone should have been a sign to their parents – these twins were set on a collision course from their birth.

The two boys were rivals for their parent’s affection and attention. Esau, the older, was robust and drifted toward outdoor activities like hunting and farming. His father would later say that the scent of his son Esau was “like that of a field the Lord has blessed,” which I believe is a polite way of saying he smelled like rotting crops and animal waste. Only the parents of sons know that odor.

Esau was his father’s favorite, while their mother fawned over Jacob. Rebekah adored Jacob, and was worried that he might lose out on the better part of the family inheritance. So she egged Jacob on to deceive Isaac by cheating Esau of his inheritance. The plan worked -- and as Isaac grew more feeble, Jacob pulled another trick and received the blessing of their father which was intended for Esau.

A house divided cannot stand – and it soon became apparent to Jacob that his brother would kill him if he didn’t get out of town. He runs away, in part to escape Esau, but also in search of the promise God had given to his father Isaac, and to his grandfather Abraham.

It’s a long, twisted story of a dysfunctional family, which I believe is the Bible’s way of telling us that God can use even the most convoluted of family circumstances.

So Jacob runs. He goes into the wilderness, wandering far away from his family of origin. He's the first child to leave the home, and he is not at all suited for these sorts of outdoor adventures. Unlike Esau, Jacob is not an outdoor guy. He probably had allergies. He attracted chiggers. He didn't like the heat. His idea of camping was a hotel without a swimming pool.

Late one afternoon, as the sun was setting, Jacob pulls off the road and finds a place to spend the night. He's so exhausted that he doesn't even mind putting a rock under his head for a pillow. He's rocked to sleep under the stars but then is suddenly rocked by a dream. And what a dream!

He sees a staircase. He can't believe his eyes: all that glitters is indeed gold, and he is dreaming of a ladder, sort of a staircase to heaven. Unlike both the Led Zeplin song and the campfire song we learned at Bible school, this is not really either a staircase or a ladder. It is instead a sort of ramp, what the people of Jacob's time would have called a "ziggerant" or sacred ramp connecting heaven and earth.

And on this ramp he sees God's messengers ascending and descending. Suddenly, God is standing beside him. God says to Jacob, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac." That would be enough, but then God continues by promising Jacob the land on which he is sleeping—something far greater than the inheritance that he stole from his brother. "Know that I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land," God tells him. "For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob awakens, and suddenly he is filled with the deep awareness that he is standing at the foot of heaven's stairway. Immediately, he stacks up stones, leaving them as a reminder of the place he now calls "Bethel," the house of God.

Dreams are powerful insights into our subconscious thinking. Dreams help us process the experiences of daily life and may prove useful for understanding how our mind is trying to make sense of what is happening. As Jacob dreams, he begins to understand all that God has promised.

The dream reminds us of how close God draws to us. Make no mistake: Jacob was not a pure hero. He's a mixed bag, a cheat who has tricked his brother and deceived his father. He is not a saint, but rather like all of us, an ordinary person who is lost and in search of something he can't quite understand.

And in that place of lostness, he is found by God. Jana Childers remarks that the story reminds us that sometimes it is the holy ground which finds us, rather than us finding holy ground.

The late Bernhard Anderson was a great Old Testament scholar who once described scripture as an unfolding drama that invites our participation. Anderson said we are called to participate in a sort of improvisational way. By using the characters and basic plot lines of these stories, we insert ourselves into these roles and begin to see what meaning this story may have for us.

If we do that, we might get a sense of just how surprised Jacob was by his circumstances. He had thought of himself as a fugitive, a guy who was on the run. He may have imagined that the world would treat him just as he had treated others: cheating him out of a destiny, out of purpose, out of meaning. But Jacob us surprised in that holy place. He finds hope in that place, and he experiences the presence of God.

The story may surprise us. In all honesty, there are few people who have had these sorts of mystical experiences of God. We may yearn for these experiences, may even dream of them and experience them in part, but then the alarm clock rings and we awaken to the realities of our lives. And lately, those realities have been stressful and at times difficult.

But let the truth of Jacob's discovery startle you a bit. When he awakens, he struggles to find words to describe his experience and then finally says, "God was in this place, and I did not know it."

Yes, Jacob: God was there, and you did not know it. God was there in the hospital room. God was there in the moments of your greatest fear. God was there in the struggle for freedom. God was there in the very moment you felt faith slip through your fingers. God was there.

And we did not realize it.

Poet Langston Hughes imagines that sort of faith in his poem, "Mother To Son." Its lines are a speech form a mother to a son, reminding him to keep climbing the staircases he finds, even when his legs are weary:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.¹

Don't you set down on the steps. Remember God is with you, even when you did not know it. Amen.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47559/mother-to-son>