

I was the guest preacher in a church several years ago and to be fair, no one knew I was the preacher that day. I was standing in the church office before the service when a woman rushed in, slammed a book down on the church office counter and was headed right back out the door. Recognizing that the book she slammed down was a bible study on the book of Genesis and just being plain ole nosey, I stopped her and asked why she was leaving the study book behind. She replied, "Because this bible study has nothing to do with my life!" Again, with my interest further piqued, I prodded some more. "I'm guessing you don't have a dysfunctional family like I do then?!", I said. With the doorknob in one hand and one leg out the door, she turned, looked at me and said, "Oh no, I do!" "Well, then you really should read the stories in Genesis. It's all about dysfunctional people. It makes soap operas look mild," I told her. Looking at me, as she slowly began to absorb my words, she let go of the door, walked back over to the counter, picked back up her book and left the office. Today, we're looking at one of those stories of a dysfunctional family in Genesis- particularly a story involving a man named Jacob but first, some of the backstory. In this first book of the Bible, Genesis, we find Abraham and Sarah, who finally, in their old age, conceived a child, and named him Isaac. Isaac grew up and married Rebekah at age 40. They had trouble having a child. God told them that they would have twins and the older twin would serve the younger one. Esau and Jacob, their twins, fought in their mother's womb. Esau was born first: red and hairy and then came Jacob named as such because he was born with his hand gripping his brother's heel. We're told that Esau was a skilled hunter and Jacob was quiet and kept to himself. Due to his love of hunting, Esau was his dad's favorite and Jacob was what we might call a "mama's boy" (Gen. 25:25-28). Working with his mother, Jacob tricked his blind

father, Isaac, into believing he was Esau and therefore, stole both Esau's birthright AND his blessing. Needless to say, when Esau found out what Jacob had done, he wanted to kill Jacob. Fearing for her son's life, Rebekah begged Jacob to run and to seek refuge at her brother Laban's house in Haran. So Jacob left quickly and this is where we pick up in today's scripture. But before we listen for God's Word to us this day, let us first pray. **[PRAY.]** Listen to a word from God found in Genesis 28:10-19a. I'll be reading in the New Revised Standard translation (NRSV). **[Read Genesis 28:10-19a.]**

Jacob was on the run- running away from his past and uncertain of his future. Having lived up to his reputation as a trickster, Jacob was now vulnerable as he traveled alone, leaving his mama, his family, his home- everything behind. Though dysfunctional, it was all he knew. Scripture tells us that Jacob was in this certain place by his own doing and decided, as it was getting dark, to stop and spend the night there (28:11). So he found a stone and using it for a pillow, he laid down for the night. I cannot imagine that the stone nor the ground was very comfortable, but we're told as Jacob slept, he dreamt of a ladder- really more like a ramp- leading from earth to heaven and angels or messengers of God were ascending and descending on it (v. 12). "And it is here in this certain place and in this dream, at his most vulnerable moment, that God speaks to Jacob for the first time" (workingpreacher.org, Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, p.1). The Lord stands beside Jacob and tells him, "I am the God of your grandfather and your father." God introduces himself by name to Jacob. In the Bible we hear of people like Jacob having dreams where God speaks to them or sends them a message. However, many of us, truth be told, don't think these God dreams

really happen today or if they do, rarely do we share or believe them. It's 2020, an unbelievable year, and we've outgrown the idea that God speaks to us in dreams, right?

In February of this unbelievable year, I was serving as pastor at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, and I didn't know where God was calling me. I was really struggling in my discernment to stay there or to go. One day I received a FB message from a colleague in Central America asking me if I had seen the ad for Triune in *The Christian Century*. She didn't know where I was in ministry but wanted to reach out because she felt like Triune would be a good fit for me. I thanked her, only said something to my spouse and kept on at St. Giles. Yet, I still felt unsettled. A few weeks later, word got out that I wasn't the one called to stay at St. Giles as their permanent pastor and that was hard. A parishioner asked to come and see me. As we visited, she shared with me that she was at peace about me feeling unsure about staying there as their pastor. She went on to say that she had had a dream about me...a dream where God assured her that I was going to be called to a church committed to social justice and that we would still be connected through that church. I had no idea at the time that I was going to put my name in here at Triune, as that happened several weeks later. This wasn't the first time in my life where someone had told me of a dream where God revealed to them something about me and my future. That is a whole other story for another time. However, I will say God speaking in dreams still happens, and it still surprises. It is powerful when someone dreams for you through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It doesn't sound like Jacob had had any previous relationship with God before God visited him in this dream. But now...things had changed. Jacob and God had been properly introduced, and the relationship stuck. The dream introduced an alternative reality for Jacob. He was not alone. God was with him. Though scripture doesn't tell us, there seems to be a peace about Jacob...a slowing down from the running. Over and over again in the Bible, God comes where He isn't expected or maybe even known and transforms places and people. Notice that the dream shows nothing of God's judgement for Jacob's past, **rather** the dream focuses on an alternative future with God. God loved Jacob more than the worst thing he had ever done. After revealing this ladder from earth to heaven in the dream, the Lord goes on to tell Jacob of the generational promise he made to his grandfather, Abraham, and to his father, Isaac and now to him. But then God goes on to promise Jacob even more: **God says:**

**I promise to stay with you.**

**I promise to protect you *wherever you go*,**

***I promise to bring you back to this very ground.***

***And I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you.***

(v.15). More unbelievable than God showing up in a dream is that God FULLY commits to Jacob...this fugitive on the run...this guy who had a career in deception...this conniver who was driven by fear and lust for having it all. **THIS guy was sought out and claimed by a loving, grace-filled God.** "God binds himself to this treacherous fugitive. Here a 'non-place' is transformed by the coming of God into a *crucial place*" (*Interpretation: Genesis*, Brueggemann, p. 242). This no-name place...this ordinary place was transformed into holy ground. And Jacob was transformed, too.

When Jacob was awake, his world was filled with fear, loneliness, and I suspect shame and unresolved guilt as well, but the dream allowed some space for Jacob to receive some good news from God. Good news Jacob might not have been able to hear- to take in and believe- when he was awake. This dream confirms that there is “traffic between heaven and earth. Earth is not left to its own resources” (Brueggemann, p. 243) and heaven is not a remote place where God and the angels live. God and the angels, God’s messengers, are at work on earth as it is in heaven. Some people call this a “thin place”- where earth and heaven meet. In this dream Jacob is shown that God is a God of possibility and promise- that God has not cut him off. God’s promise comes to Jacob in a dream, and his response comes in his wakefulness (Brueggemann, p. 246). After waking up, Jacob is so moved by this divine encounter that he proclaims, “Surely the Lord is in this place- and I did not know it” (v. 16)! Jacob realizes that the kingdom of God is at hand”. So...Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, set it up for a pillar- an altar- and poured oil on it (v. 18). Then he named that unnamed place, Bethel, which means “house of God.” Jacob knew he was on holy ground. Where or when in your life have you experienced holy ground?

Jacob’s understanding of the house of God “was not a building, nor an enclosure, but an open place with earth for a floor, and heaven for the roof” (*A Stone For A Pillow*, Madeleine L’Engle, pp. 6-7). In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Episcopal priest and prolific writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, argues that the whole world is the house of God and if you look for it, you can see the holy in every action, every day of your life. Taylor quotes, “The last place most people look [for God’s presence] is right under their feet, in

the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives” (p. xiv). In this book, Taylor offers several practices to help people, like you and me, recognize God moments- holy ground- altars in this world, especially if we’re having a hard time recognizing them. Hasn’t this pandemic taught us that as lovely as this physical sanctuary is, we’re in the house of God whenever we experience God’s presence- whether that be outside in God’s creation or in the grocery store or out here on the corner of Stone and Rutherford?! Friends, we, too, are walking on holy ground. Like with Jacob, God knows the complicated histories that have carried us to this moment. Like with Jacob, God shows up when we’re afraid, lonely, broken or are uncertain of the future. Wherever we find ourselves- God promises to be with us. Like with Jacob, God knows the names of all our generations, for God is there in each story of falling away and turning home. Like with Jacob, we have not been cut off from the sustaining love and grace of God. Friends, God comes to us in unexpected places...in the midst of all the messiness and uncertainties of our lives...as well as in a baby born in a manger. Only God can and does make the ordinary holy. So whether in your wakefulness or in your dreams, pay attention for surely the presence of the Lord is in these places, and we didn’t know it. And then whether you pick up a rock and pour oil on it or find your own way of marking those places as holy ground, as altars in this world, remember God’s promise to each of us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.