

“A PLACE CALLED AWESOME”
GENESIS 28: 10-19a

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The ancient Druids, it is said, took a special interest in in-between things. Like mistletoe, which is neither a plant nor a tree. And mist, which is neither rain nor air. And dreams, which are neither quite waking nor quite sleep. They believed that in such things as those they were able to glimpse the mystery of two worlds at once.

Remember when you were a teenager and you looked into the full-length mirror on the bathroom door or the athletic locker room? You looked at your body and you saw the pimples and the half-developed muscles and the opaqueness of your self. You wondered what it would be like to be an adult. You were not quite a child and not quite a grown-up either. It was hard work being an adolescent.

Then, you got older. Now you may look in the mirror and see the sagging muscles, the graying hair and the liver spots. And you wonder what more is in store in this time between the times. Living in two worlds at once is tough.

Jacob is like that. He's a man who wants to be innocent and self-forgetting and open and honest. But he is also guarded, selfish, self-centered, bullying. He's a lot like us. He tries to be both what God has called him to be and what the world demands of him. He tries to straddle life's disparities and paradoxes instead of giving himself wholly to one side.

In this incident in the Jacob saga, we catch up with him as he's running away. Jacob encounters God directly in a place where the fugitive did not expect a religious experience. It is not even a place whose name is known until the encounter. And it occurs when Jacob is living outside all the protections of conventional meanings and social guarantees. He has cheated his brother Esau out of the birthright, he has turned the law of primogeniture on its head, and has gained entitlement to everything their father Isaac owns. But he has paid a heavy price. He is banished from his homeland and he's trying to find a safe place, a refuge from his brother's anger and the shame placed on him by his kinfolk.

Jacob is very much a postmodern person, one who is trying to escape the past by going to another country and reinventing one's self. It's one of the reasons more than one of us in this congregation fled a small town in Iowa or Michigan or Texas or Arkansas. But the feeling of being cut off, of being banished haunts us.

The English have a word for it; it's called being “sent to Coventry.” It means to be shunned, a time when nobody speaks to you, has anything to do with you, shuts you out of polite society. Coventry, a factory city that manufactures airplanes and bicycles and automobiles was depicted in a movie of several years ago in which a factory worker was

“sent to Coventry” by his mates on the assembly line. It drove him mad—to the point that he committed suicide.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare offers eloquent testimony to the dread of such banishment:

Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say “death;”
For exile hath more terror in his look,
much more than death. Do not say “banishment.” . . .
There is no world without Verona’s walls,
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence banished is banish’d from the world,
And world’s exile is death. Then “banished”
Is death mis-term’d; calling death “banished,”
Thou cut’st my head off with a golden axe,
And smilest upon the stroke that murders me

(Act III, Scene III)

So this banishment brings Jacob to “a certain place” where he “stayed . . . for the night . . .” And there he finds himself helpless before the power of God. Here’s a man who knows how to get his way, a man who is always scheming, always at least three moves ahead of anybody else in the game of life, always the one who takes the initiative. He thus comes to the place with no religious agenda. He’s only concerned for his personal safety.

He takes a stone and puts it under his head and falls asleep. And it is in his dream that he sees an alternative future, a vision of what can be. The waking world of Jacob is very much akin to ours: it is possessed by fear and loneliness, apprehension about the future and regret for the past. But the dream is not a review of his shameful past. It is an encounter with God, and perhaps it’s the only time God can come to a man like Jacob—in a dream when his guard is down. The dream permits God to tell the conniver good news.

Now admittedly the story raises difficult questions about the nature of encounters with God. We can psychologize about the story and thereby deny its objective reality. Dreams, as Freud pointed out, serve two immediate functions: they keep us asleep and they help us deal with emotions and issues that we otherwise couldn’t handle. Or on the other hand, we can dismiss the story by saying that it’s part of and the result of a primitive religion. Dreams and visions get mixed up.

But the narrative shatters our presuppositions. It insists that the world is a place of such meetings. God comes to a treacherous fugitive and God binds the divine self to such a man. God comes to Jacob in wonder, mystery and shock. God comes in an ordinary place, so obscure it has no location on a map, no name. And tells Jacob good news.

The good news is that there is traffic between earth and heaven. The description of Jacob's dream calls it a ladder, but it was probably more like a ramp. The vision Jacob would have had from his experience would be something like a huge ramp, a ziggarut formed as a temple through which earth touches heaven. The news is that earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm "up there" or "out there." Paul Minear has explored what heaven means, and he asserts that it is a metaphor by which the Bible refers to the reality of *promise* related to the purposes of God.

Promise is a difficult concept, because like Jacob we have a past which is marred by shame and regret and we don't want to rely on promises. We want assurance now that everything will be o.k. Trust is not a word we use easily. We don't trust each other, we don't trust the media, we don't trust our elected leaders, we're not even sure we trust God. And we certainly don't trust those who speak on God's behalf.

One of my heroes in the faith was Ernest Fremont Tittle who was Senior Pastor of First Methodist Church in Evanston from 1918 until 1952. He was not only a great and fearless preacher but was also a first-rate biblical scholar. When he died of a heart attack in his study, he was working on a major commentary on Luke's Gospel. When First Church, Evanston, virtually kidnapped Dr. Tittle from Williams Street Methodist Church in Delaware, Ohio, they didn't know what they were getting. He came to Evanston after serving in France in World War I. If you have read Paul Fussell's book, *The Great War and Modern Memory* or the most recent tour de force by John Keegan, *World War I*, you know what that war meant to modern history. Until 1914 we lived in the 19th century. Since 1918 we have lived in almost two centuries of terror and racism and ethnic-cleansing.

Because of the causes Dr. Tittle championed and the stance he took on issues like war and peace, racial and economic justice, he was branded with that most serious of appellations: "liberal." Which means in the minds of many people even today, irresponsible.

What Ernest Fremont Tittle was insisting is still the issue for the church: that the Gospel should be related to life. It's always hard—now harder than ever, I suspect—for the church to be reliable and viable. Fundamentalism and biblical literalism were rife in the thirties and forties in this country; they just weren't that visible. The Scopes Trial of 1925 had run those folks underground, but they were still organizing. Today they are more powerful than ever, they are constantly fighting to keep evolutionary theory from being taught in our schools, and they cleverly try to substitute a new form of fundamentalism called "intelligent design."

Any time the church takes a stand on issues of race or economics or sexuality (to name three), we have somebody who is going to label us "communist" or "terrorist" or, worst of all, "liberal." When Fred Phelps (remember him?) and his family came all the way from Topeka, Kansas, to protest my openness to gays, lesbians and transgendered persons several years ago, one of his signs declared, "Your pastor is lying." A friend of mine saw it and remarked, "We didn't need some guy coming all the way from Kansas to tell us

that!” When we reduce each other to nonentities by putting labels on one another, we forget not only what grace is about but what it means to be the church.

A recent New Yorker cartoon catches the spirit of such people. A man comes out of a church door, shakes hands with the pastor and says, “To hell with you too.”

We face one of the most significant crises in the history of the church. Our Christian words have become tame, easy and familiar. They no longer speak in any concrete way to a world in which market individualism is in a state of collapse. Until recently, many of us had not experienced that reality. We lived in the safety of a booming prosperity. But we are victims as Santayana pointed out because “those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it.”

“For the truth is that western culture as we have counted on it is in a serious state of collapse, a state of collapse that is immediate and concrete for every pastor, even if it is given other names,” Walter Brueggemann has written. “Specifically *old modes of power, old patterns of certitude*—liberal and conservative—and *old claims of privilege* on which we commonly count are in deep jeopardy. In place of such power, certitude, and privilege, God is doing a new thing, the shape of which we cannot yet see. And not seeing makes us anxious, and then greedy, and then brutal.”

Taylor Branch writes of the experience of Martin Luther King:

The limitless potential of a young King free to think anything, and therefore to be anything, was constricted by realities that paralyzed and defined him. King buried his face in his hand at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that he had nothing left, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. Then he said as much out loud. He spoke the name of no deity, but his doubts spilled out as a prayer, ending, “I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” As he spoke these words, the fears suddenly began to melt away. He became intensely aware of what he called an “inner voice” telling him to do what he thought was right. Such simplicity worked miracles, bringing a shudder of relief and the courage to face anything. It was for King the first transcendent religious experience of his life... the moment awakened and confirmed his belief that the essence of religion was not a grand metaphysical idea but something personal, grounded in experience—something that opened up mysteriously beyond the predicaments of human beings in their frailest and noblest moments.

God comes in ordinary places, places so usual and mundane that they exist outside cartography, either real or spiritual. They are our places, places like kitchen tables and riding on the Kennedy or standing on an el platform or sitting in the quiet of a sanctuary in Hyde Park.

God makes promises and we remember the places where we realized them and we call them sacred. Jacob names his Bethel. We name ours... The place itself is not chosen and made holy. Its sacredness is disclosed by God, discovered by us and then recognized. It is not designed by human architects but by God.