

July 19, 2020
You Have to Be There
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Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 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. 12 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. 13 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; 14 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. 15 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." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17 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."

18 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. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

"God is here, and I didn't even know it!" Jacob said. God is HERE. Here in the middle of this mess, which had him running like a fugitive and sleeping on a stone. How he couldn't know God was there, is both a mystery and obvious, of course. It was the difference between knowing *about* God and *knowing* God for himself. And there is no formula, really, for calculating so great a difference as that.

I remember the exact day I could read without even trying. I was probably seven years old. I felt like I knew magic; I felt powerful; I felt like a whole new person. I was an adult the first time I saw the ocean. It wasn't as powerful a difference as from not knowing how to read to reading, but it was pretty powerful. And the first time I saw a baby born, the first time I held my own baby, the first time I saw a person die, the first time I saw a person die who was not ready to go, the first time I tasted whiskey, the first time I tasted a mango.

Nothing I had seen or read or heard or learned **about** these things compared to knowing them with my own eyes and ears, my own hands and mouth and nose. “God is here and I did not even know it!” Of course Jacob didn’t know it. But also, how could he not? He’d heard about God his whole life. And the promise too; his dad surely talked about it and about his grandad too. No doubt he could recite the promise by heart, if there was a prize involved. But none of it prepared Jacob for encountering God himself one night, in a place called Luz. That is our story for today. First let’s pray.

When we live on other people’s leftovers, O God, when we don’t pray or study or worship you for ourselves, may the resulting hunger, doubt, and exhaustion drive us back to your waiting table, a table laid with grace, wisdom and faith enough for whoever comes to be filled. Amen.

So, picking up where we left off last week, Esau despised his birthright, and famine fell upon his family’s land. His father Isaac picked them up and went looking for a new place to farm, possibly Egypt, he thought. This is a bit of foreshadowing, but for now God says, “No, not Egypt. Here is where I mean for you to stay. This is the land I promised your father Abraham, and here’s where I mean for you to stay.” This is the longer text in which the promise of Abraham is transferred to Isaac, the promise of land, descendants as numerous as the stars, of a future and a hope. You know it well.

So Isaac tries mightily to start over in a new place, there among the Canaanites upon whose land he is. The problem being, as happens everywhere, every time he settles down and digs a well, the people who were there first come along and say, “Hey, that’s our water!” And Isaac is forced either to fight or move along. In one place, a place called Gerar, Isaac pulls one of his father’s famous tricks of trying to pass his wife off as his sister – not for her sake, mind you, but to save his own skin.

Thankfully, unlike his mother, Rebekah isn’t abducted and raped before Isaac’s scheme is discovered. But you can see why she might be put out all the same. Anyway, a Philistine king named Abimelech runs Isaac off because of this close call over Rebekah, and Isaac starts over yet again in a place called Beersheba where, it turns out, he finally can settle down for good. Abimelech has a change of heart, and they make a peace accord, and things go along swimmingly for a few decades, except for Esau marrying a pair of Hittite women who are mean to Rebekah. Rebekah could be a sermon miniseries all her own, let me tell ya, for all that she puts up with.

Somewhere after Isaac’s 100th birthday, he decides it’s time to officially confer the birth-right blessing to his firstborn son, Esau. Isaac is so blind and crippled and oblivious to what goes on in his own house, Rebekah is able to trick him into speaking the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. The scene is absurd and heartbreaking. Absurd, because people like us place so little value on the power of speech, while in the Bible speech is action. Words cause things to happen. *God spoke and there was light.* Words make something from nothing.

Isaac blesses Jacob. Everyone knows it is a mistake, but it cannot be undone. The words have been turned loose and cannot be brought back. Esau is shattered. His crying belies his age – he’s forty, maybe even fifty years old, and sounds like a child. *“Bless me, me also, Father!”*

Isaac blames Jacob. He blames Jacob and claims a level of impotence that is staggering, really. He’s the dad, the father, the patriarch! And says he can do nothing? He could take Jacob out back and whup the tar out of him. At least take the blessing back, split it in half and give Esau his share. Only, it’s not candy, is it? And they aren’t children. And this isn’t 2020. This is the Bible, and blessings are words, and words can’t be taken back or split or divided because we think things are supposed to be fair. Esau pleads, *“Have you only one blessing, Father?”* The Bible says he lifted up his voice and wept loudly.

He does. But the blessing Isaac comes up with is somehow worse than no blessing at all. *“Your dwelling will be away from the earth’s richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.”*

Interesting, what Esau does with that blessing. I might preach it at the end of this tale. Of course you can read ahead to find out. For now, he hates his brother for it. Not his daddy, mind you. His daddy he will go still another mile to please. He decides to kill his brother and take a third wife to ease both the hatred and the hurt inside him. Rebekah cons Isaac one more time to get Jacob out of town – she to save him from his brother; he to get him married to a girl from home.

As for Jacob, I expect he felt like he’d won the lottery. Finally out from under his simple-minded brother, about to score a wife or two. Night is falling in a place called Luz. He decides to make his bed. A stone for a pillow, the Bible says, which is another name for a grave, don’t you know. We know because he wakes up in heaven, at the foot of the stairs anyway – angels coming and going like waiters from the kitchen to the dining room, God’s own self standing next to him, saying words Jacob may have known by heart but this time is hearing for the first time:

“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;¹⁴ 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.”

Jacob rises from this grave and declares, “God is here and I didn’t even know it.” From not knowing to knowing, it’s always a kind of resurrection, isn’t it, like the soldier at the foot of Jesus’ cross? He says practically the same thing Jacob says here, “Surely this is God, right here.” I wonder how his life turned out. Or that rich tax collector Zacchaeus,

who went and dumped his fortune on the kitchen table once he'd met Jesus. Money simply didn't mean anything to him anymore.

Resurrections, don't you know? Folks who went from knowing about God to knowing God personally. And not just in the Bible either. Years ago a woman called me at my office. She said she wanted to tell me something she was too embarrassed to tell anyone she knew.

Jesus came to visit me in my bathroom, she said. It was the middle of the night and I got up to pee. I was on the toilet in my bathroom and the window was open and there was this breeze, and Jesus was there. I thought I was dreaming but Jesus said, "No, I'm really here." The thing is, I don't think about Jesus much one way or the other. But this was real. And except for telling me I wasn't dreaming, he didn't talk with words. He was just there and his being there made me absolutely sure that everything in the whole world was okay, and that I didn't need to worry about anything, even though I am not particularly worried about anything. Just that I don't need to worry, ever. After a minute he wasn't there anymore. But that was okay, because he had been there and I knew it.

She asked me if I thought she was crazy. I said no, I definitely do not think you are crazy. And I thanked her for calling me. I don't know how it changed her, but I do know how it changed me. I could tell more stories. But I think the ones that count the most, the ones that count as resurrection stories, the ones almost too embarrassing to tell out loud – at least to people that we know – stories so close to the bone of our fears and disappointments, are so intimate, so on the verge of *crazy*, we don't much know the words for them.

One other time, a woman told me the story of her childhood. It took hours. I wanted to run away. There was so much violence and terror. I only stayed because I was too embarrassed to tell her I was afraid. She said she was afraid her whole life but eventually, as a grown-up, she came to believe God had always loved her. And even though she didn't know how not to be afraid, she was also loved. And that being afraid and loved is better than only being afraid. God came to her and raised her from a grave of fear. And friends, sitting with her that day at Bryan Park so many years ago, I also knew God again, and more. Raising me again, and more – I can't explain it.

You had to be there, we say when someone doesn't get the joke. You have to be there too, if you want to know God, because knowing **about** God will only ever take us so far. And there is so much further to go in this life, so much further. May we go, knowing for ourselves, and with all our hearts, that God is in this place.

Would you pray with me? *The courage to walk in your spirit is not easily maintained, O God. We prefer more convenient paths. We ask for brave hearts and a pace that keeps us together. For all you give by way of grace, wisdom and faith, make us ever grateful, we pray.*