

THE GATE OF HEAVEN

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Genesis 28:10-22

How many of you were aware that Canada—our very polite neighbors to the north—have, for the past half century, been engaged in a war. Yes, Canada—for 44 years—has been at war with Denmark.

This war centered on a border dispute over a chunk of land known as Hans Island. Hans Island is an uninhabitable rock. It is small. It is only one-half square mile in size (about 300 acres). It sits in the dead center of the Nares Strait. The Nares Strait is a 22-mile-wide body of water that separates the very top of Canada from the very top of Greenland. And Greenland is one of three countries that form the Kingdom of Denmark.

In 1973, Canada and Denmark signed an agreement through the United Nations to establish the border between Canada and Greenland. The previous boundary had been based on old, unreliable maps and needed to be updated. The new boundary ran right down the center of the Nares Strait and therefore right through the middle of Hans Island. Both nations claimed the island as their own. Because the Nares Strait is only 22 miles wide, the island falls within the 12-mile international border of both countries. For a long time, the two nations simply chose to ignore the issue.

However, hostilities over the island erupted in 1984. It was that year that Canadian soldiers landed on Hans Island and planted a Canadian flag. If that wasn't enough, at the base of the flag, they also left a bottle of Canadian whisky.

Word of this encroachment got out and no one less than the Danish Minister of Greenland Affairs flew by helicopter to the island. He planted a Danish flag and replaced the Canadian whisky with a bottle of Danish schnapps. He also left a note saying (in Danish), "Welcome to the Danish Island." And so began what became known as the Whisky War with each country planting their flag and exchanging bottles of liquor.

The matter of Hans Island is of a serious official nature. Border disputes always are. But the diplomats on both sides kept everything in perspective and displayed a tremendous sense of humor. As wars go, you can't do better than swapping bottles of booze. No lives were lost, no blood was spilt, but there were shots. We'll return to the Whisky War in a moment.

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Our scripture reading for today continues our journey through the book of Genesis. And today we are looking again at Jacob. Jacob is now a fugitive, running for his life away from his brother Esau who has vowed to kill him because Jacob stole Esau's inheritance. Last Sunday, we looked at the story of the birth of the twins Esau and Jacob and then how a famished Esau gave up his inheritance for a bowl of Jacob's stew. Another story tells us how Jacob duped their father Isaac into granting the inheritance to Jacob. Jacob's mother Rebekah insists that he leave town as the only course of action. She sends him back to Haran, her home and the land of his grandfather, Abraham. She expects that her son will be gone only a short while until his brother cools off. But in the end, Jacob is away for twenty years and his mother dies before he returns.

In our reading for today, Jacob has fled from his home and has set out alone for Haran. When it becomes nightfall, he stops to sleep. The location wasn't chosen for any particular reason other than that was just where he was when the sun went down. As a sign of his grim situation, Jacob has no pillow to sleep on and so he selects a rock as his pillow. He goes to sleep and as he sleeps, he has a dream—a wild and sensational dream of a ladder connecting earth to heaven. This is likely not a ladder as we would picture today, but probably a set of stairs in the side of a great structure—a pyramid or a ziggurat. This is a stairway to heaven. On the stairs observes angels ascending and descending conducting the work of heaven. In this dream, God appears next to Jacob and proposes a covenant with him, a covenant not unlike the one that God made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather. *I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac. I will give this land to you and your offspring. Your offspring shall be numerous. I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*

Jacob wakes up from this dream and declares, *surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.* He then proclaims, *How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.*

The next morning, Jacob takes the stone that he had slept on and sets it up as a pillar—a shrine—and anoints it with oil. He calls this place Bethel which means House of God. Jacob recognizes that this is indeed a holy place.

Growing up, Jacob was a child of privilege. Not only was his family wealthy, but they were religious aristocracy. His grandparents were the great Abraham and Sarah—the first couple called by God. His father is Isaac, promised by God and a miracle himself, born when Abraham and Sarah were well past their child-bearing years.

As a young man, there is no indication that Jacob had any relationship with God. I imagine that Jacob considered himself religious because his family was

religious. I am sure he dutifully worshipped God at the altar. He offered prayers and sacrifices as required.

But then Jacob is forced to run for his life and as he sleeps dreams that dream and his eyes are opened to a world that had been hidden from him, a world filled with divine activity, angels moving between heaven and earth, moving across the earth doing God's bidding, a world in which God is alive and active and present. In this world, God is active, God is building relationships with people. But Jacob is still Jacob and he assumes that this God must be a schemer like him and assumes that God plays by the same rules; he assumes that there are strings attached. Despite what God promises, Jacob has to negotiate his own terms. *If God goes with me and watches over me then the Lord shall be my God.* That is the deal that Jacob proposes. In God's infinite patience, God does not object.

When we read this story, we like to focus on the otherworldly vision of the stairs with the angels going up and down between heaven and earth. It primes our imaginations. But that is not the most significant aspect of what is going on here. That would be the covenant that God reaffirms with Jacob, the covenant first uttered to Abraham and Sarah. But this time it specifically includes Jacob—Jacob the less than perfect, Jacob the schemer, Jacob the swindler, Jacob the liar.

Jacob no doubt grew up hearing of the covenant made with his grandparents, but likely felt left out. After all, God never spoke to him before. He didn't lead a life like anyone that God cared about. But all that changes when he is on the run and alone. He sleeps with his head on a rock and dreams a vision in which YHWH speaks to him and makes a covenant with him.

When he awakens, he declares that place to be holy and he blesses it by building a shrine and naming it Beth-el, or House of God. For centuries after that, Bethel would be one of Israel's holiest sites.

But what makes this site so holy is not just that Jacob encountered God here. What makes the place worthy of the title *gate of heaven* is that this where we encounter God. Despite our individual or corporate wrongs, despite how badly we may have led our lives, despite how we may have pushed God away, God is still with us. God is with us even when we are on the run and cut off from everyone we know. God is willing to come and remind us that God has plans for us.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: what dreams or signs or encounters have we had that should be labeled *Gate of Heaven* or *House of God*? What place or experience in our lives points to God's intentions for us, for our church, for our community? What moments have opened our eyes to the mysteries of God's kingdom and empowered us to follow God's way?

The good news here is that this moment had a profound impact on Jacob. He would be gone for twenty years, but he would return home a changed man walking in the way of the Lord. We'll see this next week.

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So, back to Hans Island. When we left it, Canada and Denmark were engaged in the decades-long Whisky War. However, just a year ago, in June of 2022, the two nations came to an agreement and established a border that runs through the center of the island. In the words of the Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister, “We’re setting a precedent. We’re showing other countries how territorial disputes can be solved. It is possible to settle a disagreement, and it’s always the best way to do it through principles and norms that both parties recognize.” At the signing ceremony, the two ministers exchanged bottles of liquor in a nod to tradition.

However, both nations made it clear that this was more than just an agreement over little Hans Island. With the war being waged in Ukraine, their accomplishment spoke to a greater audience. The Danish Minister explained it this way. This signing “sends a message to the world, including [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, that when there are things you’re disputing over, you have to make the resolution based on international law—not by the law of force, but by the force of law.”

This is truly remarkable, and for this, I would like to nominate Hans Island as a shrine to peace, as a gate to heaven. For it is here that our eyes are opened to a new reality, a reality based on a commitment to wage peace.

When you look at a photograph of Hans Island, you will see that is circular in shape. It has no sharp edges or craggy peaks. It has been ground down over time by the water and ice and wind so that now it is smooth and rounded. It looks rather like a great stone pillow floating in the water—a rock that Jacob might have used to sleep on.

Hans Island is not a religious issue, it is a diplomatic one. But as people of faith, we can certainly look at it with new eyes and recall Jacob’s declaration, *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it*. May Hans Island be a revelation that changes our world.

Amen.¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whisky_War
<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/14/canada-denmark-whisky-war-00039575>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61801682>