

## HOLY GROUND

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Genesis 28:10-22

In a little under four weeks—26 days to be precise—my daughter Courtney—our only child—will head off to college. We will load the car and drive over to Memphis one afternoon, spend the night, and then start moving her into her dorm at 8 a.m. the next morning. At noon that day, the school will gently but firmly send the parents away and we will get in the car and drive home. That will be a long trip. In preparation, I have purchased an extra-large box of industrial-strength Kleenex—for my wife, of course.

As we get closer to that move-out day, we are all feeling emotional. Our daughter is excited and understandably anxious. My wife and I are feeling all the clichéd emotions—excitement, pride, worry. The past eighteen years have gone by quickly. I remember bringing that new baby home, putting her in the crib, staring at her, and thinking, “What do we do now?”

That problem quickly sorted itself out and we have had eighteen years of school and sports and church and friendships and dances and vacations and marathon games of Monopoly. And now she is heading off to a new adventure—on her own. Many of you have graciously shared with me your own experience and advice on becoming empty nesters. My wife and I will need it. However, I am highly confident that everything will work out well... as long as we keep the box of Kleenex close by.

Our scripture reading for today tells of another young person leaving home and heading out on their own. This is Jacob, but his story is a little bit different than my daughter's or your children's, hopefully. Jacob is a fugitive, running for his life away from his brother Esau who has vowed to kill him because Jacob has stolen Esau's inheritance. Jacob is also running from his father Isaac because Jacob duped Isaac into giving him that inheritance. Jacob's mother Rebekah insists that he leave town as the only course of action. She sends him back to Haran, the land of his grandfather, Abraham. She expects that he'll be gone only a short while. But in the end, he's gone for twenty years and she dies before he returns.

In our reading, Jacob has fled from his home and sets out alone for Haran. When it becomes nightfall he stops to sleep. The place 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. He selects a stone to serve 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 and 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—a stairway to heaven. On the stairs he sees

angels ascending and descending. 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. For Jacob, this is holy ground.

You would think that Jacob would be happy. God has spoken with him and offered a covenant with him. But Jacob is a schemer and an opportunist, and he insists on bargaining with God. He says, *If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.* God offers a covenant—a gift—and Jacob attaches provisions. Jacob is one of the most complex figures that we find in scripture. He goes from being a person who steals from his family to one with whom, in the end, God self-identifies when God declares, *I am the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*

What I would like to look at today is how Jacob's understanding of God—his faith—changes and matures through his lifetime. Although Jacob is an extreme example, I believe that we can recognize ourselves in his life's story.

In Jacob's story, I see three stages of his understanding of God—of how he views God. First, he sees God as an idol; then he sees God in his own image; and, finally he sees God as Lord.

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, 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 to Jacob, God was a little more than a idol carved in stone—about as interactive as a pet rock. This is how I view the first phase of

Jacob's faith journey—that God is distant and absent. That God as exists only as an idol to be served.

I am sure that many people today view God in this way—they acknowledge God, they go through the motions, but they have no connection, they are blind to God's presence in their lives; they are unable to recognize God's activity in this world.

But then Jacob has that vision 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 not a stone idol passively receiving sacrifices, God is active, God is building relationships with people. But Jacob is still Jacob and he assumes that this God must be like him. Jacob is a schemer 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. This is the second phase of Jacob's faith journey, to see God but to make God in his own image. Again, there are many people who see God this way. If they are angry, then God is angry. If they are scared, then God is scared. If they are anxious, then God is anxious.

Jacob's story continues on for many chapters. Jacob journeys toward Haran and goes to work for his uncle Laban. Jacob marries (twice)—first to Leah, then to Rachel. He becomes wealthy. After two decades he decides to return home to his brother and face the music. He makes that return journey and along the way wrestles with an angel. God renames him Israel which means *he who struggles with God*.

As he journeys home from Haran, this time accompanied by family and flocks and herds, he prays another prayer. This time there is no bargaining. This time he humbly acknowledges his own unworthiness. He recounts that promise that God made him and says:

*O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac... I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant... Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother... for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all... Yet you, O God, have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number' (Genesis 32:9-12).*

In this prayer there is no bargaining. There is no "If I do this, then you shall do that." Jacob has changed. Jacob has reached his third and final understanding of God. Jacob now sees God as the Lord. God is not a cold idol. God is not like Jacob. God is the Lord and Jacob humbly and faithfully places his life, and the lives of

those with him, in God's hands. Jacob has changed. He is no longer a callow youth. He is now a man and his descendants will become a great nation of people who worship the Lord. On his deathbed, Jacob will claim his Lord as *the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day* (Genesis 48:15). From that moment on in the biblical narrative, this same God will self-identify as "the Lord...the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:15).

Like Jacob, our understanding of God changes through our lives. As Presbyterians, we like to call this our 'journey of faith.' Through our lives our faith grows and matures. Sometimes there are setbacks, but hopefully, like Jacob, we go from viewing God as a magic sky-creature to embracing a loving Lord who cares for us, who offers to us rebirth and new life. We make this transition not on our own, but because God is with us traveling along side, guiding us, accepting, patiently loving us, wrestling with us when necessary.

In a month—26 days to be precise (but who's counting)—my daughter will set out on her own adventure. We are anxious but confident because we know that God will be with her and because of that every place she goes will be holy ground.