

## **“But it was still Des Moines for a little while after that”**

Aaron James, 7/20/08

My favorite verse in this story didn't make it into the story. Not as we heard it this morning, at least. My favorite half-verse, to be more precise, is 19b. You'll notice our reading stopped at 19a: “He called that place Bethel;” 19b goes on to note “but the name of the city was Luz at the first.”

It would be as though religious historians were someday writing about my life, as I imagine they will, and they told of how I came to Des Moines. They would recount for posterity how I had an incredibly profound encounter with the Holy, and how I exclaimed “This is an incredible place! I name this place “God-At-Work!” After which, they'd be forced to admit, “But it was still Des Moines for a little while after that.”

As it would be, and should be. The universe would not shift with my new perception; GPS systems would not instantly begin recalculating. I imagine the experience would have been the same for Jacob; *his* universe had been reordered dramatically, but no one immediately noticed. 19b gives us a touch of realism in a series of incredible stories. It also gives us a clue about what it's like to live a faithful life. But to get the clue we need to get the story.

If you've been following along this summer as we've worked through the book of Genesis, you've heard some of this story already. We've had Abraham and Sarah, then Isaac and Rebekah, and then their twins Jacob and Esau. Last week we heard about the gentle Jacob manipulating his oh-so-hairy older brother Esau out of his birthright. Jacob remains our main character for today, but he is in a very different place now.

Jacob was born grasping at things that weren't his. As a twin, he was born gripping the heel of his firstborn brother, Esau.<sup>1</sup> He spends the rest of his childhood years, sometimes at his mother's prodding and sometimes by his own devices, trying to get his hands on the family inheritance, which was both the birthright of his brother and the blessing of his father. Today we find him having succeeded in that, though it couldn't have felt much like success.

You see, to get the blessing, he lied to his blind father on his deathbed.<sup>2</sup> His father was intending to give his blessing to his elder son, Esau. But while Esau goes to prepare a meal, Jacob deceives his father into giving him the blessing instead, a blessing that ensures power, prosperity and posterity. Naturally enough, Esau wants to kill him, and we find Jacob this morning running away, the bearer of a stolen blessing and all the curses that came with acquiring it.

But perhaps all we really need to know about Jacob is that he is away. He is away and getting farther away. He is away from home, his mother and dying father, his vengeful

---

<sup>1</sup> The name “Jacob” is a play on “grasps the heel” (HarperCollins Study Bible, see note on Gen 25:26, 27:36)

<sup>2</sup> The full story is the 27<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis, and is actually quite a poignant story

brother. And he believes he is far away from the God of his family, a God he referred to as “your God,” when talking to his father.<sup>3</sup> We can imagine that he felt the gulf between how things were and how things were supposed to be widening immeasurably.

He is on his way away when he stops for the night in no place in particular. He lays his head on a stone and falls asleep. “And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth,” the story tells us, “the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” Much has been made of the ladder image. You can make of it what you will; there are probably many “correct” interpretations. I take it to mean, at least in part, that this is a place, for Jacob, where heaven and earth make contact.

And it is where God encounters him. “I am the LORD,” God says to him, “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; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth.” God’s promises to Jacob echo the earlier covenant with Abraham,<sup>4</sup> promising a place and the offspring to fill it. And like the covenant with Abraham, this is not arbitrary favoritism but providence with purpose: “and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring,” God says. Jacob was blessed and so became a blessing. By grace God met him on his way away; when Jacob was alienated from everything he knew, God came to him in a surprising and startling way that made his life come alive.

When Jacob wakes up, he’s terrified. God was revealed in a way that for him was very real, literally “awesome.” He “did not know it,” but he was on holy ground. That’s key: the land does not become holy – he just becomes aware that it is holy. And when he does, he gets religion again.

Jacob springs to life. He takes stone that he had slept on, turns it over, sets it up like a pillar and pours oil on the top. As alien an action as that might seem to us, it is, in many ways, universal: he responds to his spiritual experience with a religious ritual.

Which is where, I think, we lose some people. There are many who would describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” Why bring religion in? Why ruin the experience? We know human beings; we know our history. Sure, Jacob had an intense spiritual experience, but why build an altar when before long someone will decide that local altars aren’t the way to go and they should all be destroyed so that people will worship solely, properly, corporately, in Jerusalem?<sup>5</sup> Why bring the corruptible and human into the pure and spiritual?

And they would have a point, really. Religion, even at its best, even as a response to God’s gracious revelation to us, is often little more than a weak impression of our holiest experiences. But those who would dismiss religion miss on two important counts, I believe. Two that have the potential to inspire and transform our lives.

---

<sup>3</sup> In Gen 27:20, Jacob says to Isaac, “Because the LORD *your* God granted me success” (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> See Gen 12:2-3, for example.

<sup>5</sup> Which, of course, they did. See Deuteronomy 12:2 and following. Also, Jacob technically builds the altar at the place of the pillar during his return to Bethel in Gen 35.

I. *Religion is practice.* It is the practice of the presence of God.<sup>6</sup> Religion is the means by which we grow in awareness of the sacredness of life and the transforming power of God's love. We don't create holiness and we don't manipulate the divine; rather, we become increasingly aware of what God is doing. God indeed seeks us out when we are away, but, having been found, we take time to continue that relationship through practice.

This is the central insight, I believe, of our Stepping Stones program. "*Every one, Every night, in Every home,*" is encouraged to practice the presence of God. Not to bring God into the home but grow in our awareness that God is in the home. Not to make ourselves more holy but to recognize and nurture the sparks of the divine that abide within us.

II. *Religion is testimony.* It is the means by which we share with others our holiest experiences. Jacob sets up a pillar and anoints it with oil not to capture God, not to make something spiritual happen, but to testify to the experience he had in that place, to create something that points to the Holy. Something he slept on became a sacred symbol, remembering where the mundane was transformed and heaven and earth made contact.

This is the power of the sacraments we share (Communion Saturday night and Baptism Sunday at 11:00). We celebrate two of the most ordinary human activities, washing with water and sharing a meal. And while they may not spark spectacular visions every time, in the sacraments we join two essential and enduring elements of religion in one activity: recognition and recollection. We practice recognizing how God's presence can be revealed in the otherwise ordinary, and we continue to testify to our enduring relationship with God.

When we get this, life changes. God comes to us in a way that is personal and unique and transformative. We are no longer unwilling participants in someone else's relationship with their God; like Jacob we have seen for ourselves and the promise is now ours. We now do more than bear the burden of the expectations of previous generations; we are now the main characters in the story of God's work in the world. Heavy obligation becomes joyful opportunity. We begin to live our lives on holy ground.

Which brings us back to the clue of 19b: "But the name of the city was Luz at the first." The mystery of the life of faith is that a transformed and transforming life may be very difficult to see, even when it is our own. The world will still see us as ourselves for a while. This will still be Plymouth Church for a while. Regardless of what happens in our lifetimes, it will still be Des Moines for a little while after us. When God encounters us, wherever we are, life may look very much the same, but is profoundly, blessedly and irrevocably different. And, at times, even a little holy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup> A phrase used by 17<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite monk Brother Lawrence, and the title of the book of his collected wisdom: *The Practice of the Presence of God*, which I recommend highly. It is a timeless, simple and clear testament to the practice of seeking God in whatever we do.