

Jacob is in a pickle. Things at home had gotten to be unbearable, so he ran away. You see, he stole something precious and important from his brother, something he could never give back. And not only that: he also deceived his father. And now his brother is out to kill him. So he is on the run. That first night away from home is tough; he doesn't know where he is, he's in a strange place, a place he's never been before, and he doesn't have anywhere to sleep. It hits him that he's all alone in a big, scary world. And to make matters worse, he knows he brought it all on himself; he knows is a scoundrel. He is afraid for his life.

So, out in the middle of nowhere, once the sun sets, he looks around for a place to sleep, but all he finds is a stone to use as a pillow. He lies down on the ground, and goes to sleep for the night, probably very aware of all the nighttime dangers. And while he is asleep, he has a dream: there is a ladder, or, more accurately, a ramp or a stairway, on which angels are coming up and down between heaven and earth. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that this ramp connecting heaven and earth has great significance: this ramp tells us that earth is not separate from heaven, but heaven has to do with earth, so earth can count on the resources of heaven.<sup>1</sup> This ramp tells us that there is a connectedness between heaven and earth; there is connectedness between God and people.

And then, in Jacob's dream, God speaks. And God makes amazing promises to Jacob. “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give this land to you and to your descendants, who will be many; and the families of the earth will be blessed through you. Know that I am with you; I will keep you wherever you go; and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you.” Wow.... Here God promises *to be with Jacob*; Jacob is not profoundly alone as he had thought. God promises to *protect Jacob*; and God promises to *bring Jacob back home*. God promises to give Jacob *a large family*, and *land*; God promises that this scoundrel Jacob will *be a blessing to other people*. Wow... these promises of God to Jacob are breathtaking. And when Jacob wakes up from this mysterious and powerful dream, he says with awe and wonder, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.”

There are lots of powerful themes in this story, but I want to focus on two of them this morning. First of all, Jacob the scoundrel did not deserve any of this! God knew all the bad things Jacob had done, but God loved him anyway. God recognized the potential in Jacob; God knew that Jacob was more than the mistakes he had made, even those big mistakes he had made. What a powerful message for us today: the mistakes we make may be different than the specific mistakes Jacob made, but, just like God loved Jacob anyway, so God loves us anyway! Like Jacob, each one of us is more than the biggest mistake we've ever made. Like Jacob, we don't deserve God's goodness, but God gives us goodness anyway. We don't deserve God's promises, but God gives them anyway. God loves each of us more than we can possibly imagine — in spite of our bad decisions, in spite of our words and actions that hurt other people and that hurt

ourselves. God knows all of the “dirt” of our lives, and God loves us anyway! And God calls us, like Jacob, to be a blessing to other people as well.

The other part of this story that jumps out at me is the wonderful line that Jacob speaks when he wakes up: “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.” Here Jacob wakes up in this strange place, away from everything he’s ever known, but because of the dream, he realizes that God is there with him. In the midst of all the messiness of Jacob’s life, God is right there with him, blessing him, making promises to him. And so it makes me think that, even in the midst of the messiness of our lives, God is right here with us, blessing us and making promises to us, even though much of the time, it’s hard for us to realize it.

As I have been working on this sermon this week, this phrase has rolled around in my head and in my heart all week, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.” You know, we adults tell children that God is everywhere, all the time, and yet it seems that we don’t really know that. How is it that the Lord is in this place, and we do not know it? We go about our daily lives, eating and sleeping, working and interacting with each other, worrying and laughing, all too often completely unaware of the presence of God in our midst. A writer named Esther de Waal writes, “What a waste it is to be surrounded by heaven, by a sky ‘made white by angels’ wings’, and to be unaware of it.”<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that God is “hidden in plain sight.”<sup>4</sup> God is all around us, in ways mysterious and wondrous, but only seldom do we have “eyes to see and ears to hear”.

And so this week has had a different quality about it for me, because this phrase from Genesis would pop into my head at the most ordinary of moments, as I was doing the most routine things: as I was shopping for groceries or cooking supper, as I was standing in line at the post office, as I was eating lunch with my mother, as I was driving down Stone Avenue, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” What a gift it has been for me, to have this little whispered reminder of the presence of God in the midst of the ordinary everyday moments, to see, with the eyes of the heart, the presence of God, if only for a fleeting moment.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a Jesuit brother named Jean de Caussade wrote of the “sacrament of the present moment”, the holiness of each moment. What might our lives be like if we could experience the holiness of a moment, more and more frequently? The only way I can think of to do this is to try to pay attention, pay attention with the eyes of the heart, pay attention with the ears of faith, pay attention to God in our midst. As we nurture this ability to pay attention, we may see and hear many different reminders of God. For example, a brilliant sunset or an intricate spider web can make us catch our breath with a sense of awe at the beauty and wonder of God’s creation. Or, in a conversation with a friend, we may hear words of comfort and encouragement coming from God, not just from the friend. Or, as we sincerely apologize to a friend or a spouse and, amazingly enough, receive forgiveness, we may just taste the radical grace of God. As we celebrate the birth of a baby, we may glimpse the mystery of God’s gift of life. As we listen, truly listen, to someone with whom we disagree, we may hear God’s call to humility. As we grieve the death of someone we love, we may experience the love of God

expressed through the love of family and friends. As we tuck a child into bed at night, we may be blessed by the peace of God.

If only we have eyes to see and ears to hear, God is “hidden in plain sight” all around us. Like Jacob, we can experience the presence of God and the blessings of God, in times and places that we least expect it, even, like Jacob, even in the midst of the messiness of our lives. And with Jacob, we can then say, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!”

Thanks be to God!

1 Brueggemann, Genesis, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 243.