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Genesis 28:10-19a

28:10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

28:11 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.

28:12 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.

28:13 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;**

28:14 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.

28:15 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."

28:16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "**Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!**"

28:17 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.**"

28:18 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.

28:19a He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Romans 8:12-25

8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh --

8:13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

8:15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

8:16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

8:17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

8:19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;

8:20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

8:21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of

the glory of the children of God.

8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;

8:23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

8:24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

8:25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Proclamation of the Word

Wednesday morning as I was reading for this sermon about Jacob's dream, Hallie ran into the kitchen.

"Mom, I had the craziest dream last night. I was on my way to see *Hamilton*, the musical, but I could not find the theater. I was directed the wrong way and ended up in a restricted area so the police were after me. They handcuffed me and I told them, 'Do you know how hard it is to get tickets to this show? I will turn myself in, just let me see the show.'" She somehow escaped and took her hair down so they would lose her. The fear of them finding her...being caught and trying to run away...was terrifying. All she wanted to do was watch *Hamilton*.

Have you ever had a dream like that? when you are running away from danger and cannot get to a safe place? Your heart racing. You feel helpless...afraid. It is a nightmare.

Jacob was living a nightmare. He was on the run from his brother Esau having stolen his birthright and tricked their father into blessing Jacob, the younger brother, rather than Esau. Jacob is living up to his name, "Grabber"- trying to grab everything for himself. You remember. Jacob puts on animals skins so his blind, dying father would think when he touched him to bless him that Jacob was Esau, the oldest brother. Esau threatened to kill Jacob.

So he ran.

Maybe you have been on the run literally or figuratively. My mother told me the story of my father and brother getting in a fight when brother Les was in High School. Les, decided to empty his savings account, and run away. We were living in Honea Path, and I am told Les hopped a Greyhound Bus headed for Myrtle Beach. I suppose that Myrtle Beach was an alluring place for a teenager in 1973. That Sunday at the First Presbyterian Church, the pastor preached on the parable of the Prodigal Son. No coincidence there. Les got to Spartanburg, had time to think, and turned around and came home. The Spirit was at work in that worship service, for it helped touch the heart of my father towards a disobedient son.

Family conflict can cause one to run away....or bad memories... or guilt. People run away for many reasons. Sometimes they go nowhere at all, but run away to work- overworking to escape something or someone.

Recently, I read that the new status symbol these days is being too busy especially as it relates to work."ⁱ I think being too busy can be a way of running away- from deeper relationships, from our neighbors, from yourself perhaps.

Some folks escape by overindulging in the Home Shopping Network, or the internet, or video games, or a substance that numbs the pain. Other folks run away from failure or consequences.

Jacob is running away from home- running for his life. He has surrendered the protection of his family and a the source of a livelihood. He surrenders the land and the promise God has given him. God promised Jacob a family, a productive farm, and a future. He has just thrown it all away. He is between a rock and a hard place. In ancient times to leave the protection of one's family, to be banished, was a death sentence. Family and tribe was one's only protection.

Here Jacob is in a place that is really no-place, just an in-between place. No man's land. He's left Beersheba and on his way to Haran where his uncle Laban waits to swindle the swindler. Jacob's purpose is to go marry a cousin- someone the family would approve of. Neither here nor there, Jacob finally stops running.

Even with all that stress, Jacob surrenders to sleep somehow. He picks up a rock to lay his head upon, and falls into to a dream. And that is when God shows up. Not just angels, but God in person, right there beside him. This must be a big intervention for God to show up. Heaven and earth connect by a ladder. Jacob is not taken up to heaven, but God stands beside him. God comes to Jacob, and Jacob has an AhA! This is the ONE.

"Surely, the LORD was in this place and I did not know it."

It was as if they met for the first time. The LORD introduces himself. I am the God of Abraham and Isaac.

Perhaps you and I have had those AHA moments, where we really know for the first time that God is present and oh so real. Not always, but it can happen when we are running away, or in trouble, and finally let down our guard and surrender like Jacob. Notice Jacob did not pray the sinner's prayer as my Baptist friends and family say, or repent, Jacob got hit over the head, so to speak. Jacob does not confess his wrongdoing even, but God still promises him a hopeful future. The best part- God will be with him all the way.

"Surely, the LORD was in this place and I did not know it."

Jacob is out in the middle of nowhere- both literally and figuratively when God shows up. He has a change of heart, it seems- a conversion. Like mystic Thomas Merton once said we spend our lives climbing the ladder of success, and when we get to the top, we realize the ladder is propped up against the wrong wall. Jacob wanted power, possessions, and position this whole time. The man whose

name means Grabber assumed he had to take it and get that blessing by any means necessary. Come to find out he was barking up the wrong ladder. He did not need to grab it. God promised it. God gives him a new role along with those things- he will be a patriarch responsible for God's people. And it will all be by God's hand, not his grabbing for it. God has chosen him.

With gift come responsibility. No wonder Jacob is afraid. Like Elie Wiesel said, **"When an angel shows up and says 'Be not afraid.' You better watch out. A big assignment is on the way."**

But it still makes me unsettled. Jacob never confesses his greedy, scheming, deceitful ways. He doesn't admit he tricked his brother out of a blessing and his inheritance.

I find I am more like Jacob than I want to admit, though. I have always known that I am a child of God, baptized, signed and sealed for Christ. And while I seek to be a disciple and live faithfully, I think there is part of me that expects God to give me some of what I want and think I deserve... as if it is a right and not a gift. I want good health, but I don't always eat right and exercise. I don't want to worry about money, but sometimes the bills stack up. And let's admit it, isn't there a part of each of us, who like Jacob, want to be the favorite child sometimes?

Maybe the only way to reach Jacob was to let him hit bottom. God sneaks up on him. Thoreau once wrote, "The truth strikes us from behind, and in the dark." Jacob would concur, I imagine, and say,

"Surely, the LORD was in this place and I did not know it."

Jacob realizes his camping spot is none other than the House of the Lord. So he plants his pillow-rock and pours a little oil on it to dedicate it to the LORD. Jacob thinks he is being generous when he promises God a 10th of all he has, but if it weren't for God, Jacob would have nothing. It all belonged to God. Still he recognizes God and makes a commitment.

Do you have a time in your life, looking back, where you did not realize it, but God was right there beside you all the time? Maybe you thought, "Surely the LORD was in this place and I did not know it." PAUSE Think about that... memory and reflection are great teachers.

Perhaps you had the where-with-all to recognize God because we have been given a great ladder, a great connection to God through the gift of Christ's church. For without people who show us who Jesus is and teach us about God, we would have no language or concept to see God who was there all along. Today our new friends in faith have dedicated themselves to serve Christ, his church, and God's mission in this world. This is holy ground- a sacred space. And we in turn, commit to them to seek God together and to share in our vision,

Joining together on a journey of faith, we seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ sharing God's love in our community and world.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a gift, a ladder to connect us to God.

Another ladder to help us connect to God is the gift of Scripture which we study together in community. I am learning to love Paul's letter to the Romans again. Had a bad Bible Study experience with Romans in college, actually, a bad Bible Study teacher. But a good teacher later helped me understand Romans. Basically, Paul spends the first half of the book saying, "You are children of God...", and the second half, saying, "...so act like it!" I am so grateful for those good teachers who have a heart for God's people and use their minds in service to Christ Jesus. That is the work of the church, because believe me, there is plenty of bad pop theology and teaching available.

Today's passage from Romans shows us the intimacy and relationship that Paul has with God because he calls God, "Abba" the familiar for Father. We are adopted children who have become heirs of this promise, too. This promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That promise gives purpose and meaning to our lives, collectively, and to the whole creation. Paul knew better than Jacob that "...there are a few things in this world that you cannot get but can only be given, and one of these things is love in general, and another is the love of God in particular. ⁱⁱ

But this gift and promise, does not come without suffering. We suffer for and with Christ. We suffer because we have this HOPE for God's people and God's world. We serve a God who cares for the earth, for the least of these, for God's hopeless ones, and for those who do not know they are loved. The suffering that Paul speaks of is because of the gap between what God desires for this world, and the reality.

The Church, the Scripture, friends in faith, and the work of the Holy Spirit are ladders that connect us to God's loving purposes.

And every once in a while, there are glimpses of hope when things seem to be made right again. Maybe you heard the story on Channel 4 news or read it a couple of months ago.ⁱⁱⁱ Nicholtown Presbyterian church, an African-American church in downtown Greenville. They received a letter and a gift of \$2,000. Now what you need to know is that Nicholtown Presbyterian has 15 members and an annual budget of \$27,500. So \$2,000 is a huge gift. The giver of the gift is unusual. He or she wishes to remain anonymous. The letter read,

May 13, 2017

Nicholtown Presbyterian Church
Clerk of Session/Treasurer
P.O. Box 17005
Greenville, SC 29606

Dear Sir or Madam:

Please accept this \$2,000 donation to Nicholtown Presbyterian Church. I send it for two reasons:

1. First, I am white and used to be a terrible racist. Thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, acting through the Presbyterian Church, I have been cleansed of that. Due to Christ's teachings, I am appalled at my former thoughts and words. I send this donation as a heartfelt apology to the African-American community, as a sign of God's love for you, and as a sign of my love for you as well.
2. Second, if you were ever looking for proof that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are alive and well today, and that miracles, just as in Biblical times, still happen today, this is it! It is thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit alone that I have been cleansed of my former racism. Apart from Jesus and the Holy Spirit, acting through the Presbyterian Church, this transformation never would have happened.

So please use this donation for any purpose you see fit. (I did not fill in the "From" name or address; if that creates an issue, please feel free to fill in whatever you want there if needed.) May God bless you!

Signed,
Anonymous Donor

"Surely, the LORD was in this place, and I did not know it."

God works and changes lives, redeeming them for God's purposes. The 15 members, mostly older, have an outreach to the neighborhood children. They feed them breakfast and teach them about Jesus and God's love for them on Sundays. That \$2000 will go a long way to serve that purpose.

When we finally surrender to God, we find that God is right there beside us. Has been all the time. We are never alone.

There is only one catch, once we know we are claimed as God's own beloved children, we have to live like it!

ⁱ Joe Pinsker, 'Ugh, I'm So Busy': A Status Symbol for Our Time; Once, long ago, being richer meant working less. March 1, 2017, The Atlantic.

ⁱⁱ Beuchner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, Harper & Row, 1979 quoted by Doug Bratt, Sermon Starters, Old Testament, Genesis 28:10-19a at cep.calvinseminary.edu

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/local/2017/05/23/former-terrible-racist-apologizes-gives-2-k-black-greenville-church/339697001/>