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Where Heaven and Earth Meet

Genesis 28: 10-19a

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Have you ever heard about “Thin Places?” The idea and reality of “Thin Place,” comes, primarily, from Celtic Christianity, the theology and practice of the Christian faith that held sway in most of the British Isles from the fifth to the ninth century until its outer forms were stamped out by the dominant western Christian church. Celtic Christianity was characterized – and is very much alive today, by the way – by extreme holiness, a love of God, a profound grasp of the experience of the Trinity, and powerful experiences of God manifest in all life. Today, for instance, in places all over Ireland, there are holy trees, holy wells, holy mountains, holy parts of the seacoast – places where people feel a deep and strong connection with God. It is in these places where heaven and Earth meet, where the veil between time and eternity is “thin,” very thin, places that are between this world and another dimension, places that are so sheer, it’s easy to step through, where it’s possible to be touched by God, as well as angels, spirits and those who have died and gone before us.

Most religious traditions and spiritualities have “thin places.” I know that for the Lakota Sioux peoples of the northern Plains, Harney Peak in the Black Hills of South Dakota is such a place, as are Mount Blanca, Mount Taylor, The San Francisco Peaks and Mount Hesperus, for the Navajo people. These are places where religious rituals are carried out because in these places, matter and Mystery touch, and the person or person who opens up himself or herself to the Mystery, will be touched by Powers beyond our rational categories or control; one may even hear the Voice of God.

In many ways, this is where we find ourselves as we step into the familiar story we call Jacob’s Ladder. If you don’t stop to consider it, the framework of the story isn’t much: Jacob is at some non-descript place between two important places: Beersheba and Haran. “He came to a certain place,” the narrator says, “and stayed there for the night because the sun had set.” No big deal; just a place to park it for the night on his journey between important places while fleeing for his life from his furious brother, Esau. But something happens in this so-called “ordinary place” that transforms it to a place where heaven and Earth meet: God makes his presence known here. And it all happens while Jacob is asleep, in a dream.

Funny, isn't it, how amazing things often happen when we're not in control of a situation, even not in control of our own lives? How could Jacob resist the purposes of God at night, when he's let go of his white knuckle hold on what he's convinced is his destiny? How can we?

The meeting happens between God and Jacob in a dream. The wakeful world of Jacob, if you remember some of his life, was one of fear and terror and loneliness. Remember how obsessed he had been to get his father's blessing when it was rightfully his brother's, Esau, and how he connived and cheated Esau out of his birth rite? Jacob had a plan; had his goals; he envisioned his future and laid down a seven year plan and would do everything he could to make it come to be – just as he wanted. But if you remember the drama of his earlier life, all those things he did to realize his lofty goals and life ambitions, left him on the run, and he found that you can make it to the top (yes, he would be the ancestor to the nation of Israel), but his way of getting there had left his life in shambles.

Can you relate to that in any way?

So, Jacob falls asleep on the ground and has a dream, the powerful experience that opens the doorway to an alternative life. "Jacob," the Dream Inspirer whispered, "it doesn't have to be the way it's going for you. There is another way." And so, we sing that deep and powerful Gospel song:

"We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
Soldiers of the cross."

The news, here, is that there is traffic between heaven and Earth. Flesh and spirit are two different things. Time and eternity aren't opposite poles of anything. It's one, all one. Jacob, thinking he's all alone and all on his own, is shown by the angel procession that he hasn't been left to his own devices and neither are we. Heaven has to do with Earth and Earth with heaven; and Earth can count on the resources of heaven - for everything.

This is powerful stuff, you realize. Though we didn't read it in worship, the Psalm for today is Psalm 139. Listen to part of it:

"Where can I go from Your spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your
Presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol,
You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits
of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and Your right hand
shall hold me fast.”
(Psalm 139: 7-10)

This might not be such a big deal to most because we know God is always with us, everywhere, at all times and in all circumstances, right? At least the rational parts of us know it. But this reality of God's presence everywhere shatters the world of Jacob. He had assumed he was traveling all alone and his only purpose on his life's journey was to survive: Eat or be eaten; kill or be killed; stomp on the other guy, even if it's your brother, or be stomped on. If we believe evolution is nothing but random chance and meaningless biological meandering, then there's nothing wrong about Jacob's worldview. God? No need. Irrelevant. But I say, "Not so!" There is meaning in this evolving life, your life and mine. There is a higher purpose for you, Jacob, because this place, this Earth, this life, is a place of possibility. Why? Because God is within it all – always – and with you.

That's what this "Thin Place" between Beersheba and Haran is really all about: there is a God whose Presence transforms our reality from fear to love, despair to hope, selfishness to service.

“Every round goes higher, higher;
Every round goes higher, higher;
Every round goes higher, higher;
Soldiers of the cross.”

Up and down, back and forth, over and under, in and through: the veil is so thin that we know, we can feel the touch of heaven and Earth.

That's really something, but let's not forget the content of the dream; it's a speech, by God. There's always speech in the Bible because the spoken word is power and the word has power to create an entire new reality.

“In the beginning, was the Word,”

begins John's Gospel

“and the Word was with God and
the Word was God . . .

And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us.”

(John 1: 1, 14)

A whole new reality is created by the word because when God speaks, there is promise. Jacob had come to this place running for his life, without any promise at all. But now it comes: “I am with you.” Four simple words that stand at the heart of it all. It is one of, if not THE central thrust of our biblical faith – and the faith of just about every religion and spirituality that I know about.

“I am with you.” Four simple words; four of the most powerful ever to be spoken, for these words, from the One who creates heaven and Earth, refutes all the despairing judgments about our lives. This Jacob - fugitive, cheating swindler who was empty-handed and at the end of the line - has not been abandoned. God will be with him and stand with him in places of threat and fear.

Some time ago, I read about the Cherokee Indian’s youth rite of passage, which at about the age of 12 or so, a young man is taken into the forest by his father – blindfolded – and is left there. The young man is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not take off the blindfold until the ray of sun shines through it. He is all by himself and cannot cry out for help from anyone but once he survives this test, he is considered a man. He can’t tell the other boys of his experience, either, as each boy must come into his own manhood.

The boy, of course, was terrified. He could hear all kinds of noise: animals, birds, insects, night sounds; none of this he could see. Perhaps some human would come and hurt him. The winds blew, shaking the trees and grasses and he felt that they even shook the stump on which he sat. But he sat through the night, never removing his blindfold.

Finally, after a horrific night, the sounds of the night disappeared. The boy could feel the warmth of the sun on his face and so he removed the blindfold. It was then that he saw his father, sitting on the stump next to him. He had been on watch the entire night.

You are never alone. The Presence is transformative, shaping you to be who you have been created to be.

The story says even more. If the first promise is Presence – “I am with you” - the second is about an action: “I will keep you.” The “Thin Places” of life are powerful reminders that we are not left to our own resources. All around us and within us is that which upholds, sustains and guides us in life. For example, six times in Psalm 121, the singer claims that God is our keeper:

“ . . . God who keeps you will not slumber;
He who keeps Israel with neither
slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your
going out and your coming in
from this time on and forever more.”
(Psalm 121: 3b-8)

Do you remember the beginning of that powerful benediction found in the book of Numbers?

“The Lord bless you and keep you.”

“Am I my brother’s keeper,” asked Cain? Yes! And then, even after he murdered Abel, do you remember what happens? We call it Cain’s curse, but it’s not that; God becomes Cain’s keeper, protecting him through life with a special mark. Amazing.

And the third promise of God’s to Jacob and to us, is homecoming. Exiled from his brother, his homeland and everything he knows and loves, wandering with no place to call his own, Jacob receives the promise of coming home. Later in the story, in chapter 31, God reminds him of the encounter at the place Jacob names Bethel, calls to him and says, “Leave this place and return to the land of your birth” (verse 13). Come home.

O, what good news for our world today! So many people in exile, cut off from their homes by war or famine or floods or fires or abuse. So many people – maybe even you and me - cut off from our true home, wandering around inside our souls, searching for meaning and purpose or hope or comfort, when, it’s all right here, all along, with the One whose Presence is promised. Come home.

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But finally, Jacob, like all of us is left with only a word – and he’s still asleep. So far, it’s all been promise, talk. Jacob still needs to wake up and do something - and he does. In his wakefulness Jacob recognizes that this, indeed, is a sacred, holy place, a “Thin Place.” He marks it as such in the morning and then, he continues on his journey. But he’s different now, radically different, and he becomes determined to embrace the new reality that’s at hand. He steps out and lives the promise.

How about us – how about you? From the places in your life where heaven and Earth meet, how will you live the promise?

“If you love him, why not serve him?
If you love him, why not serve him?
If you love him, why not serve him?
Soldiers of the cross.”