

Night Terrors: Descent
Genesis 28:10-19
for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC
16 July 2023

We continue Jacob's story in Geneses 28, verses 10-19:

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³And 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; ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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."

¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And 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."

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

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want you to know, first off, that *I know* that there is nothing about the following sentence that makes much sense.

Recently I was thumbing through the 282-page November 1948 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*. Tucked in its pages, between "What Men Notice About Women" and "Children Without Neuroses," right next to adverts for Hi-Ho Crackers and paraffin-wrapped butter, interrupted only by a recipe for olive-stuffed jello salad, are the findings of a *Journal* endorsed study of the American religious landscape.

"God and the American People," was written by Lincoln Barnett and delivered the results of a "nationwide survey designed to assess the intensity of religious faith in the United States and the degree to which it governs the ethic and behavior of American people ..." Analyzing the data were none other than theological titan Reinhold Niebuhr,

the Reverend Simon Greenburg of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and a Catholic priest, Father George B. Ford.

At the time of the survey 95% of Americans reported a belief in God, *Yet*, and this is important, only 5% of Americans reported that “they look upon God as a source for forgiveness.” For the author of the *Journal* the conclusion was clear:

“Since the individual American believes himself to be good, he does not need to worry about God now, today; his ideas of right and wrong must be God’s ideas too.”

In 1948 an overwhelming number of Americans reported belief in God. But the reality of God did not seem to shape the lives of American believers. Moral action was linked to self-interest with little reference to religious ethics. How else, after all, could one explain white religious support for segregationist Jim Crow politics?

God was the air Americans breathed.
But, aside from Sunday service and meal-time blessings,
God had little impact on day-to-day life.

God works in mysterious ways, and since reading the November 1948 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, I have not been able to get “God and the American People” out of my head.

Stranger still, *Ladies Home Journal* brought me to Jacob. When Barnett and Niebhur paint a picture of the peculiarities of American religiosity, it seems to me that they are sketching Jacob in flight.

Now I know y’all remember what Jacob’s been up to in the verses preceding today’s texts. The second-born twin of Rebecca and Isaac, he came into the world reaching for greatness. He wrestled his hulking twin brother Esau in the womb and grabbed his heel at birth, as if trying even in infancy to win the substantial rights belonging to the firstborn. He wanted his father’s land, his father’s money, his father’s blessing — all Esau’s by right.

He wanted power, prestige, and privilege.
He wanted and wanted and wanted
and so in his life in Beer-sheeba he climbed and climbed and climbed.

Recall the broader setting of the narrative: Jacob's life was lived in the shadow of Abraham — *the* Abraham — bearer of the covenant who fathered Isaac by miracle yet was willing to sacrifice him at God's command. God — or at least the idea of God — was the air Jacob breathed. His father and grandfather knew the God of creation like they knew the shape of their hands.

But to this point in Jacob's story the young trickster seems little concerned with the divine Father. Jacob does not appeal to God for help acquiring the blessing. He ask God for protection from raging Esau after the deed is done. He does not seek God's provision during his frenzied flight, nor does he ask that God would show him the way in the nameless desert.

God was the air Jacob breathed.
But, aside from meal-time blessings and weekly rites,
God had little impact on Jacob's day-to-day life.

Back to *Ladies Home Journal* for a moment. American discourse is fascinated and frenzied by two ideas. On the one hand, we tell ourselves that we can achieve all that we want; we can climb and climb the ladder and pull ourselves ever higher and ever upward until we have earned what we want. We've also convinced ourselves that we are a people who *deserve* God's particular blessing. In this sense work earns us salvation. Surely the two ideas are related, and if we are to believe the story of Jacob, they are a wicked knot as old as time.

Like Jacob we believe that we can climb and strive and reach all of our goals — a singular pursuit of greatness contingent only on human will; like Jacob we are assured of our own righteousness.

Climb and climb the ladder,
pull yourselves up, higher and higher.
Work.
Hustle.
Act.

Sounds an awful lot like Jacob to me.

Though the percentage of folks who proclaim belief in God has declined since 1948 — according to Pew Research Center some 83% of Americans report with either certainty or reasonable certainty that God is real — it is difficult to imagine that our situation is much different than that examined by the authors of Genesis and the good folks at *Ladies Home Journal*. Writes Barnett,

“Doctor Niebuhr, Father Ford, and Doctor Greenberg agreed that the basic impression they derived [...] was one of national self-satisfaction. The American, individually and collectively, has an easy conscience. Involved in foreign hostilities, torn by social hysterias, imperiled by [...] his plunder of national resources and the menace of atomic war, the American nevertheless clings to his good opinion of himself.”

Jacob has all he ever wanted. He stole what rightly belonged to Esau, wrenched it from the dullard like he wrenched his heel at their birth. He was self assured and brazen. He expressed no remorse and climbed on.

Until, that is, we meet him in today’s text, when all his climbing has landed him flat on his back.

For the lone traveller darkness gives few options. Jacob could go no further. So it is that the man with everything finds himself with nothing, not even a stitch of clothing that might serve as a pillow — only the rocks of the arid land.

Now I could have made this a sermon about dreams. We all know the vulnerability of dreams. No matter how in control you are in your waking life, what comes at night surprises still. Who among us hasn’t suddenly woken from a dream afraid you’re missing the final for the course you forgot to attend, that you’re actively falling, or that a shiver of sharks encircles your bed (be mindful, friends, of the age at which you allow your children to ride the *Jaws* ride at Universal).

Dreams are an experience of vulnerability and a daily reminder that we are not in control. And in scripture, dreams are a sight of God’s revelation. Jacob, who has so thoroughly controlled the narrative to this point, who has climbed and climbed metaphorical social and political ladders, is interrupted by a greater narrative actor. And though there is a ladder before him, Jacob has nowhere to go.

Look for a moment with earth-bound Jacob. The sky cracks open and above the clouds the gate of heaven swings wide. Messengers of God ascend and descend in restless frenzy. The man who thought himself alone sees the eternal commerce between heaven and earth.

And then...

“the Lord stood beside him” —

In the dirt all Jacob can do is receive the Word of the Lord. I wonder if, in that moment, a pang of guilt at the potential judgment of God struck Jacob's bely.

It would be reasonable, after all, to expect judgment. Jacob tricked old blind Isaac and stole from his brother. He knew better.

God stands beside the fugitive, the trickster, the thief, the cheat.

What do you think happens next?

When it comes to stories like Jacob's — a trickster and thief far away from God (not so dissimilar from Cain, who killed his brother Abel, or the prodigal son, who left his brother toiling in a field) — we expect that God will dole out punishment according to our sense of right and wrong. If you had never read this story before you might anticipate that Jacob's encounter with the divine leads to punishment.

What a relief, for we who sympathize with Jacob, when God's in-dwelling comes not as judgment, but as a call. What a surprise when God's first word is not rejection, but undeserved, irresistible grace.

And how odd that God's word is heard not while Jacob climbs heavenward but he's flat on the ground.

Dwell with Jacob at rock bottom. The young achiever told himself that he deserved all he had, that his striving was proof of his righteousness.

But in his wild dream we see — and hear — the most fundamental truth of our lives. The God of Abraham and Isaac claims us while we are still far off. God places a call on us while we're doing everything but pursuing holiness. God sets us apart (the actual meaning of the word holy) long before we have the wherewithal to lay claim to God's promise. God gives us what can be neither stolen nor won.

When it comes to God's expansive embrace, it simply doesn't matter how pure we are, how hard we've worked, or the sum of the hours we've put in. It doesn't matter if we've hustled or lived our lives laid flat out by the world. God doesn't check our 401K or our performance reports.

Our nationality doesn't matter, our gender doesn't matter, our sexuality doesn't matter, our race doesn't matter. God calls us before any society calls out against us. God gives us a future, plants us in the beloved family of faith, and sets a new path forward.

Here's another way of saying it, we have been called children of God and so we are! That's why we baptize babies and children, like we did here today. That's why forego altar calls and sinner's prayers — because our reading of stories like Jacob's tell us that we aren't capable of accepting the news on our own, we aren't capable of climbing the ladder to heaven, we cannot pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and even if we could that's not what we're meant to be doing. We can only receive God's promise as the dumbfounding, abundantly gracious gift that it is.

The order of operations in God's kingdom is simple: God calls. God puts his claim on us the very-same way a loving parent claims her child. You are mine, says God. Now and forever, like it or not, hustling or falling, good behavior or bad. Ain't a thing we can do but take it for the gift it is.

When he was far off, stuck in selfish self-justification, God gives Jacob a blessing. God reiterates what was told to Isaac and Abraham. The trickster, the ladder-climber flat-on-his-back becomes a father of our faith. Standing right next to him on the dirt that will become Bethel, God tells Jacob that he will not only go with him, but he will preserve him, and one day return him home.

That's precisely what we strivers need to hear, saturated as we are in both talk of God and in the myth of individual achievement: climbing the ladder will leave us exposed, it will not keep us, it will not save us. But with God there is a better way.

Listen past the God chatter in our culture, the moralistic, pietistic language that is nothing more other than self-justification by another name. Listen beyond either/or faith that demands you believe or act a certain way and measures your faithfulness

accordingly. Listen to the God who, by the power of the Spirit, stands next to you in this Sanctuary *and* out there in the dry dusty wild. God is calling.

And that call — undeserved, irresistible — should change your life.

That's the second part of the dream — Jacob's willingness to change directions, or, to put it another way, his embrace of God's ever-descending path.

The Gospel revealed at Bethel is nothing new but it is truly amazing. The very same God who reached out of isolation to unspool creation, the God who walked in Eden in the cool of the day, the God who appeared to Father Abraham in the guise of strangers, that very same God descends the ladder to stand with Jacob and is, by the power of the Spirit, standing with us today. Nudging us forward, deeper, downward.

The story of our God is a story of descent. God comes to us in the form of a lowly child (born of a lowlier woman), God descends and descends until God breathes his last, until God hallows hell, and finally, until God tends the garden once again, only this time outside an empty tomb.

The revelation should awe and terrify you, as it did Jacob.
The God who calls you is the God who called the world into being.

Our culture, perhaps inherited from Jacob-before-Bethel, tells us that we should climb higher and higher and thereby receive blessing, we are told that our work saves us and we can rest well in our productivity. The reverse is true. God has descended to us, and in doing so has blessed us. Once and for all. Now and forever. So we ought to stop the climb.

Critically, though, that doesn't mean that we halt the journey.

Why was I haunted by *Ladies Home Journal*?

Because I recognized myself in Barnett's sweeping portrayal of ambiguous American religion. Put more succinctly, and God forgive me to borrow a word from Taylor Swift — *it's me, hi (go ahead finish it) I'm the problem, it's me.*

*God may be the air I breathe
but too often I act of my own accord,
justifying my beliefs as God's truth, my inaction as God's will,*

failing to allow God's call space to transform the character of my living.

The truth of faithful life in God-saturated culture is found in Jacob's revelation: after realizing that we are called our lives ought to look discernibly different. We do not climb, as if we are individual agents acting of our own volition, we follow — side-by-side with one another and with the self-emptying God whose earthly life was lived in descent.

Our ambition calls us upward, but following God is an embrace of downward momentum; following God does not lead skyward, but more deeply into the heart of creation.

When God finally releases him from the revelation Jacob wakes amazed, understanding that even a dusty place can be God's house. And the patriarch who had no room for God in his living consecrates the spot his transformation. He worships. And then he goes. Deeper and deeper, following the God who called him and leads him on.

After a life of God-sounding noise, Jacob finally heard God.
The man who fled to Luz was not the man who followed from Bethel.

The ubiquity of God-shaped-talk in American culture often blinds us to God's reality and God's compassionate, corrective demands. We assume that our moral actions are God's because we speak the language of faith. Parroting God does not a disciple make, and faith is not a matter of keeping our head in the clouds but of keeping our eyes on the road. Responding to God's call is not an invitation to withdraw, but to engage with the dusty, heavenly, glory-bound depths of the world, to draw deeper to the places God is leading and God is calling, places we otherwise never would have gone. Faith is not an individual pursuit of achievement and moral piety. It is the embrace of a God-formed community that leaves you in a far different place than the ground on which you were found.

The question for us today is simple: is your life discernibly different because of God's expansive, transformative call? Will you stop climbing and be led?

Over the noise the Word that dazzled Jacob still trails and leads us.
The task for we who are awake is to *finally* hear and be transformed.

—Leigh Stuckey