

Going Nowhere Fast
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection

[He]Lighted upon a certain place

And stayed there, the sun had set.

Stones for pillows.

He dreamed

There were angels going up and down a ladder.

Standing over him a Voice:

-- I will give you land where you sleep on stone,

Seed the dust of the earth.

Blest. And In you everybody -- west, east, north, south.

And awoke afraid.

-- How dreadful is this place

None other but His – the gate to Him.

From A-12 Louis Zukofsky

Introduction to Scripture

Our Hebrew Scripture reading is the lectionary's recommended text for today. Jacob remains one of my favorites among all our ancestors in faith. While certainly not the first mention of Jacob in the Bible, this story is the beginning of the cycle of stories of Jacob's development as a patriarch of people of faith – a most inauspicious beginning. Luckily for all of us, God can work with inauspicious beginnings.

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Genesis 28:10:19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 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. 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. 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; 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. 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."

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

Epistle Reading: *Hebrews 11: 8-10*

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Meditation

Going Nowhere Fast

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

While this story about Jacob is in the very early days of the cycle of stories about him, it might be helpful to know how he wound up in the desert sleeping on a stone pillow. Jacob was a second-born twin, an accident of birth-order that had great repercussions for the future. As a sign warning us of what might come, we are told Jacob was born grasping his twin, Esau's heel. But Jacob is a young man now—not an infant or middle school boy, testing the limits of his independence. Jacob earned his rocky pillow in the desert.

He taunted his brother Esau out of his inheritance. Esau was hungry after a day in the fields and Jacob offered him a brotherly swap of a bowl of beans for all he might inherit from their father. If Esau didn't appear to be the sharpest knife in the drawer, Jacob was already honing his blade for a life of trickery and deceit. Its edge was already over-sharp—guaranteed to do damage to the cutter as well as the "cut—ee" if he were careless—and he was.

He may well have learned that sly craftiness at his mother's knee. She had her own history of deceit with her siblings. Now, with her help, Jacob fooled his father into giving him Esau's rightful and powerful first-born's blessing.

Which brings us to a run through the desert. This was no training run. No endurance run—testing himself against the desert. This run was driven by fear. Not knowing whether Esau was following him, seeking well-deserved retribution. Jacob literally ran for his life, driven by his own guilty conscience. He ran from Esau. He couldn't run, however from his fear. No matter how far he went, he was carrying the past with him—going nowhere fast.

He ran with hope—hope that was less about the possibilities of the future than the consequences of the past. He sought safe haven among distant family on a far horizon. He ran. Ran until he was exhausted, alone and tired, in a nameless place. The sun went down and he could go no farther. He might have run many miles, but still, full of fear, without much hope for the future except perhaps bare existence, he had been going nowhere fast.

Hot, hungry, thirsty, he lay down. Not believing he had a prayer Jacob didn't offer one either. He lay down, perhaps thinking he was too tired to sleep, or too afraid. Yet, he fell into a restless, vulnerable sleep, a stone for a pillow.

So it was, into that sleeping imagination was borne the strange imagery of dreams, uninvited and uncontrolled. Jacob dreamed. He who had acted in ways that moved him beyond the pale of his family, he who had earned his brother's anger, he whose survival was at risk in the desert, and he who would be dependent on a reception from distant family—he dreamed.

Perhaps it is, that because he was going nowhere fast, carrying all that he had done and all his fears with him, too hopeless for prayer—the only way God could reach Jacob was to enter into his dreams. For in those defenseless moments of sleep, Jacob was not only vulnerable to the dangers of the desert and anyone tracking him, he was vulnerable to the Word of God. Jacob dreamed. What a dream it was!

Jacob dreamed the dream we know as "climbing Jacob's ladder" from the children's song. The song doesn't get it quite right. Neither Jacob nor any human climbed the ladder. Rather many heavenly beings descended and ascended the ladder bringing the Word of God to Jacob in his sleep. He dreamed that he was still in God's care, that he was not beyond the promises of God. In fact, he dreamed that God promised not just survival, but land and descendants and a return home—promises rivaling those God had made previously only to Abraham.

As sometimes happens with dreams, this one was so powerful, so present, that it startled Jacob awake. Instead of shaking it off, telling himself it wasn't real, Jacob, liar, cheat and trickster, who knew himself for what he was, dared to believe that God had recognized in him something more. He knew that he had encountered the living Lord in this place bereft of even a name.

Wisely, he was in awe. In awe. Awe in response to a divine encounter is a holy thing. Jacob had the opportunity to remember power greater than his, a divinity of amazing aspect, purpose and imagination far beyond his crafty, goal-driven thinking, and to sense the safety of God's sheltering presence. There are a lot of things we might not appreciate about Jacob, but when he got it right, he got it right.

Hard to believe, but he fell asleep again. He didn't get up to write in his dream journal or start plotting his return. He didn't stroll back toward the family enclave, smugly announcing "God said, 'It's all mine.'" He fell into a restful sleep for the first time since tearing his family apart, breaking his father's heart and leaving behind the inheritance he'd connived to get.

Wrapped in a mantle of God's peace, he slept. In the morning, the dream and the promise still held their power. Having encountered God in a place that was no place, Jacob made an altar of his pillow and gave it a name – "the house of God."

Although it continues for many more years, let's pause in Jacob's story to see what we can learn about ourselves and our God from Jacob's desert encounter.

I doubt any of us have committed acts as atrocious as Jacob's, I also doubt there is no one among us who hasn't spent more than one night, sleeping on a stone pillow. We've uttered words we wish we could take back; made a decision about work or school or marriage; been unfaithful to our spouse; cheated on a test; bullied or embarrassed someone; made decisions in the workplace or voting booth for personal gain; worried about a shadowed and unknown future and found ourselves in the nameless in-between place, between the act or decision and its consequences.

We lie in the dark, wondering if forgiveness, success, reconciliation, redemption or hope were still possible for us. Like Jacob, we don't pray, afraid that this time we've gone too far, will ask too much, deserve what comes, flat out don't know what to ask for; or think we have been deserted by our God. At such times, the softest down pillow feels like stone, our minds going nowhere fast, cycling through action and reaction, questions without answers, plans unimplemented, futures that seem more nightmare than dream.

If we are lucky, we cycle ourselves into uneasy restless sleep. If we are lucky, it is perhaps then that God can finally get a word in edgewise. If the time were right and we were paying attention, it is possible that in our vulnerable sleep, when we are out of control, a word of God's assurance may come to us—not asked for, but a free gift of grace—that we were okay or would be or would be able to

work it out—but that no matter what, in that time of pain and in whatever the future held, whether it worked out the way we dared hope or not, God would keep us.

We awakened with the inarticulate, inexpressible sense that we have been visited in the night. Nothing at all in the “real world” has changed and yet we and the present and the future are already different. We are utterly convinced that God was in that place and, until that moment, we did not know it. Our minds may go nowhere fast, or like Jacob we may physically run far from the scene of whatever crime, real or imagined, we have committed; we may separate ourselves from those we have offended. Yet we are going nowhere fast, if God has no room to work in us in the present for the sake of the future of all God's people.

If we are lucky and are paying attention, we may be filled with the graceful truth, that there is no place where we can run, no place where we can hide, no isolation we can create for ourselves, where God is not present. There is no place we have ever been, no place we are, no place we might go, where God was not, is not, will not be. Whether we know it or not, God is in every place and circumstance where we may find ourselves, as individuals or as a congregation or as a nation – of our own natures’ or the world’s making. In Scripture and life, it is clear we cannot demand or manipulate an encounter with God. God comes, speaks, heals and acts when God will. Nonetheless, we can make ourselves vulnerable and attune ourselves to the presence of God: remembering our own stone pillow dreams, those times when we were assured God was with us, whether we deserved it or not; those times when we acted with hope, because we had hope, and built our altars on the basis of that hope. Let us, like Jacob, find ourselves once again in the accepting embrace of God and know that it is never too late. Let us remember and open ourselves to the possibility that God is in this place and this time, waiting to surprise us if we dare to let God heal us this day, that we might serve faithfully and joyfully in all the days ahead.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: In celebration, in trust for your presence, in recognition of all that we have accomplished with you working in us: we remember the gifts of this past week—of health and life, days and evenings, the surprising gift of friendship, love and the possibilities of the life of faith... in silence we pray with thanksgiving

Relying on your continuing presence we look to the week ahead, as we face challenges, embrace new things, plan vacations and share our lives, workplaces, church and community with those who more unlike than like us...in silence we pray with hope

As Jacob learned, we know that your presence, guidance and power are not for ourselves alone, but for all your people in need. Turn our hearts minds and spirits outward – to people who struggle at home with aftermath of flooding, forest fires, heat without relief. Turn our eyes ever outward, to households and organizations effected by violence and abuse, and to those who care for them; to nations at war and people in pain... in silence we pray for your guidance and power...

with these words, the words of our hearts and the ones your son taught us to pray together, we offer all that we have and are and do for the sake of your son’s ministry, saying...

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Give us this day, our daily bread.

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**