

The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was, among other things, a crook. He cheats his slightly older twin brother, Esau, out of the inheritance he was due as the firstborn son. At least once Jacob took advantage of the poor eyesight of his elderly father, Isaac, and played him for a fool. Later, he beats his double-crossing father-in-law, Laban, at his own game by conning him out of most of his livestock and, then, when Laban was busy tending his flock, Jacob sneaks off with not only both the man's daughters, but just about everything else that wasn't nailed down including his household gods. Jacob was never satisfied. He wanted the moon, and if he'd ever managed to bilk heaven out of that, he would have been back the next morning for the stars to go with it. But then one day he learned a marvelous lesson in a marvelous and unexpected way.

Jacob is on a journey but is also on the run. He is traveling to Laban his mother's brother where he has been tasked to find a wife among his family. But he's also running from his family. Jacob has just stolen the blessing of his twin brother Esau. Isaac, their father wants to bless his oldest son Esau and so he sends him out to go hunting and to cook some savory meat that he likes and to bring it back so that Isaac can bless him. Well Rebekah, their mother, finds out about this and instead she sends in Jacob to receive this blessing. In a comical scene she has him wearing goat hair so that Isaac, whose eyesight has deteriorated in his old age, won't be able to tell that it is Jacob at his bedside and not Esau. Jacob receives the blessing from his father and soon after, Esau returns wanting to receive that blessing for himself, but Isaac says "I've already given this blessing away, and I've already made Jacob Lord over you and his whole family. What else do I have to give you?" Esau is enraged and plots to kill his brother once their father dies. So at the urging of their mother, Jacob runs away. He stays overnight at a place where he finds a rock and uses it as a pillow. And he has a dream. And in this dream he sees the angels of God descending and ascending a ladder. And then he hears God's blessing. Not only does this blessing connect Jacob forever to his father and his grandfather Abraham and the promise of the land, God assures Jacob "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..." Jacob wakes up and proclaims "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!"

If I was God, and thank God I'm not, I don't think my reaction to Jacob's deceitful ways would be to bless him with abundant descendants and prosperity and to promise a steadfast presence. I would want to teach him the error of his ways. Encourage him to go back to Isaac and Esau and make things right. Ask for forgiveness and mend the broken relationship. But, I'm not God.

As Frederick Buechner writes, "It wasn't holy hell that God gave him, ...but holy heaven, not to mention the marvelous lesson thrown in for good measure. The lesson was...that even for a dyed-in-the-wool, double-barreled con artist like Jacob there are a few things in this world you can't get but can only be given, and one of these things is love in general, and another is the love of God in particular. "¹

Jacob didn't have to climb his ladder to con heaven of the moon and the stars, even if that had been possible, because the moon and the stars looked like peanuts compared to what God and the angels were using the ladder to hand down to him for free."

But what struck me in my sermon prep this week was not only the devious nature of Jacob and the abundant grace God offers him at Bethel. It is the exclamation that Jacob makes upon waking from his dream. "Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it!" Most of us will never know the kind of aloneness that Jacob would have experienced in the wilderness. The wilderness of land between Beersheba and Haran. The deafening silence of being completely alone for miles. The pitch-black darkness of night that is only illuminated by the moon and the stars. But also, the aloneness of being a person without a home, without a family. This type of aloneness might be somewhat familiar to a few of you. Jacob is running for his life from one part of his family toward another part of his family whom he has never met. This is the most vulnerable time in Jacob's life. He is in exile from his family and he has no wife and no property of his own. And it is in the vulnerability of sleep in which God appears. In the midst of this aloneness, this self-inflicted aloneness that resulted from his own deceit, God shows up with a blessing and a promise. Jacob does nothing to initiate this encounter with God.

¹ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/8/7/jacob?rq=jacob>

From what we can tell, Jacob is not particularly religious. He doesn't consider the Lord, the God of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham to be his God. Even after receiving the blessing from God, Jacob's vow to God is contingent on God not only following through on the promises made in Jacob's dream but also that God would give him bread to eat and clothing to wear and that he might return to his father's house in peace. Only then would Jacob consider the Lord to be his God.

The ladder, or stairway or ramp, depending on the translation, isn't actually something we humans have to climb to access the Holy. Besides the fact that the ladder in Jacob's dream is more metaphorical than literal, it is the angels who are traversing the distance between heaven and earth. It is the Holy mystery that descends into our realm delivers the blessings and grace of God. The veil between the Divine and us, is likely much thinner than we realize. Also, in Jacob's dream, God is also not off in the distance at the top of the stairway, using the angels as a go-between. God is beside Jacob and tells him "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..." Although Jacob associates the presence of God with the particular location of the encounter and marks it with the stone on which he slept, God assures him, and us, that God's presence is not limited to time and place. The house of God has no walls to contain God's presence to a single location but instead God makes God's home in our dreams, in our hearts, in our very being.

Maybe we too sometimes feel that we are carrying deep fears, that we are on the run. Maybe, unlike Jacob, we carry a burdensome load of guilt about how we have treated someone or about something that we have done or should have done but didn't. Maybe we read the headlines and watch the news and the world around us feels hopeless and upside down. Maybe we simply feel alone. And what a gift it is when we can recognize God's presence in those moments, in this moment, and we can say "Surely God is in this place!"

And yet we are embodied creatures who experience God in places that we can feel, places that we can cherish, places that evoke memories, places that we mourn when they are destroyed. There is a scene in the movie Romero, when the church is

destroyed and the people are devastated, and the archbishop walks bravely back in to recover the Eucharist. That is an embodied and sacred experience.

Terence Fretheim writes beautifully about our need to create places of worship, "because human beings are shaped by place as well as time." Thinking back to Jacob and thousands of other ancestors who wandered, who were led, who were taken in exile, who went on pilgrimage, we find his words inspiring for us, too, their descendants in faith: "The rhythms of the ancestors include the rhythm of journeying and worship; their journeys are punctuated by moments of worship at specific places. Yet the place never becomes a final objective, where one settles in; it provides sustenance for the ongoing journey" (Genesis, The New Interpreter's Bible).

The Rev. Kathryn Matthew writes that one of her favorite images for the church is that of a "base camp," a place of safety where we are fed and rested for the journey (and work) outside its walls," but she acknowledges "that we are prone at times to see ourselves as always at work, or to be constantly reminding ourselves dutifully of the need to work. So we may miss the encounters with God that happen at any time, anywhere, in so many places and times of blessing: at rest and at play, in the quiet, alone, or even in a crowd.

Indeed, we experience God in more places than in church buildings. We may have a place in nature, or a quiet spot in our home, or maybe we have unexpectedly stumbled upon sacred ground in the most unexpected places, like hospital waiting rooms, or the operating room, or the doctor's office during a diagnosis. God is present in other places we may least expect – in prisons, in the homeless shelter, in the addiction recovery facility, in the domestic violence shelter, in a tattered cardboard box on the street corner. And yet, why should we be surprised that God is in these places? Of course she is! In good news or bad, in joy and sorrow, we hold fast to the sure knowledge that God is with us always, just as God promised, no matter who we are and no matter where we go.