

## Surprised by God

Genesis 28:10-22

Psalm 121

A dozen years ago now, I was able to travel to England and Scotland for the first time. While there, one of my favorite things to do was to visit various sites of standing stones. The most famous, of course, are the stones at Stonehenge. But those are actually some of the more modern standing stones. That one goes back to 2,500 BC; which puts it about the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there are many stone pillars set up around the isles; and many are 1,000 years older than that. Some are just waist high. Some are as tall as a Volkswagen set on end.

I was struck by the fact that these prehistoric peoples wanted to leave something that would last; and the most enduring substance they had to work with was stone. This was literally the stone age; no metals discovered yet. They wanted to leave a monument, a reminder, a testimony probably to their experience of the divine, the holy--and so they did so in stone.

I got so excited by this that I came home and put two standing stones in my backyard. Mine are only about three feet tall, and my children kid me that it looks like a pet cemetery. But I know that these stones are a testimony to God's faithfulness. They help me remember the way God has watched over me and brought me safely home.

Our Old Testament lesson this week comes from the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saga of Genesis. Like a Michener novel, the authors of Genesis follow this family as a way of telling the history of their people; they tell the stories--good, bad, and ugly-- as a way of testifying to their memories of God and God's faithfulness. The stories are not about heroes or role models. Far from it. They are about the way God works with people, all kinds of people.

You remember the early stories about Jacob, and his twin brother, Esau; children of Isaac and Rebecca. Esau is a burly, hairy, man's kind of man. He is first-born. He is the hunter, the warrior, the tough guy, and he is not too bright. Jacob is the stay-at-home mama's boy; he is sharp and always looking for an edge, an angle, a way to get up higher. Second-born might as well be 22<sup>nd</sup>. He wants to find a ladder to the top.

So he cheats his brother, Esau, and he lies to his father, Abraham. He steals the pass code to becoming the number one son by getting his father's blessing. "By hook or crook" is Jacob's creed. The only way is up. The only one that matters is himself.

So he gets what he wants and he ends up on the run. He has to flee for his life. His mother warns him to get out of Dodge, then she says to old Isaac, "Don't you think it is time that Jacob found a wife? Send him back to the old home town to meet a nice Hebrew girl – not one of these local tarts." Jacob leaves, very quickly. So quickly that he has only the clothes on his back and his staff.

His first night on the road, he lies down to sleep. He is so dirt poor that the dirt is his bed, and a stone is his pillow. The stars are his canopy. If anyone comes upon him, they may capture him or kill him. He is in tough shape as he lies down in the dark; far from the home fire, his mother's cooking, his older brother's shadow.

There comes a dream. The Bible loves dreams. These are understood to be God's Western Union; God's email. The dream knows more about the truth than the waking world does. Jacob is not lying in a lonely desert place. He is lying on the doorstep of heaven. There is a ladder, an incline, an upward path. The words seem to indicate an ancient pyramid, a ziggurat. But "Jacob's ziggurat" did not fit in the song very well. So we call it a ladder. And there are angels all over it. Angels are the messengers of God. This is clearly a stairway to heaven.

Then he hears God speak in the dream: "Jacob, I am the God who has cared for and guided your grandparents, your parents, and now you. The ground you lie on I will give to you and your descendants, so that you may be a blessing to many. Know this: I am with you, I will take care of you, I will bring you safely home."

The dream ends, and Jacob wakes. He is stunned that he has obviously fallen asleep on sacred ground. He names the place Bethel, house of God, for he has clearly been sleeping on God's doorstep. And he takes a stone, an enduring witness, a lasting testimony. He stands it up as a reminder to himself, and later to others that God is a surprising God. That God is good and good to us. That God has plans that rule and overrule all our plans.

Jacob found out that he had been barking up the wrong ladder; climbing the wrong path to success. His road was in God's hand's-- not his hands. His hope was in the Lord, not in his craft and tricks.

So I tell you this story today that is 4000 years old. It is literally as old as the hills, and as enduring as stone. The slaves who fled from Egypt with Moses told this story to each other. The slaves in the early part of U.S. history wrote a song about it, because in this story they heard about a man who was far from home, and yet discovered that God was with him; that God would take care of him; that angels were all around.

The rabbis say that a story like this has seven levels of meaning. I wonder, what does it mean to you today? What does it say to you?

Perhaps you are on a new path or about to be on a new path; headed off to college or school; starting a new job; moving into marriage life; raising children; moving into retirement. Maybe you are single again because of divorce or death. Maybe this new road looks scary, dark, with twists and turns you are not sure about. With the psalmist you cry, "I lift my eyes to the hills which seem so scary; the road ahead is full of mountains. Where will my help come from?" The answer comes, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made those hills, who formed those rocks, and trees, and stones." God knows your path. God will be on your path with you, every step of the way. Look for the angels to surprise you.

Maybe it is the competition in this story that hooks you. Here are two brothers, vying with each other. As a younger brother myself, I know a lot about Jacob and his need to get noticed.

Craig Barnes, a minister, writes:

*"Like Jacob, we all have a twin. From the day we are born we are measuring ourselves against some Esau, some standard of what we think we should be. Esau isn't just Jacob's older brother. He is also the person you... think you have to become before you are going to get any blessings. Esau is the person who is like you, but better. He is your preferred twin, the better projection of your potential.*

*This means that we're constantly evaluating our lives by Esau's standards, which we drag behind us. No matter what we do, it is never good enough because we believe Esau would have done it better. So we knock ourselves out to fill the*

*image, to become more like the twin who haunts us through life. It is the only way we know how to get his blessing.”*

We try to get a blessing by being something we are not. There is not much gospel in that. There is a place in the Gospel of John where Jesus uses this story. He says to his enemies “one day you will see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus pictures himself as the stairway to heaven.

The promises that God makes to lowly Jacob, lying in the dirt that night, are the promises we meet in Jesus Christ. I am with you. I will keep you on the road. I will bring you safely home. Those promises draw us into this place of worship. They follow us out of here. They are the roof over our lives, and the rock beneath our feet. This is Gospel: that God is for us in Jesus Christ. That our blessing comes in being what God wants for us; not in keeping up with some evil twin; or climbing any ladder we can find. God is for us in Jesus Christ. Who knows why? But our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

I have brought some stones with me this morning to help us remember this passage; these promises. In this basket are pebbles. I invite you to take several home with you. Put them in a place where you need to be reminded of the surprising presence of God. The last thing I do most every morning is unhook my cell phone from the charger. Maybe I will put these stones next to that, as a reminder to me when I head out the door. Maybe you will want to put these stones on your desk at work. Perhaps you will simply put them in your pocket or down in your purse. Then when you go looking for change, and pull out these stones, you will be reminded that God is with you on the road; and that the angels are all around.

Let these stones stand as a silent testimony to the God who promises, “I am with you. I will go with you. I will bring you safely home.”

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