

## *“How to Know what We Don’t Know”*

Genesis 28:10-19a  
Rev. Jennifer Dunfee  
July 19, 2020

We continue today on our sermon series through the books of Genesis and Exodus, surprises and disruptions in the family faith, by continuing with the surprises and disruptions found in the family of Jacob. I wish I wrote in the Thursday mail that a prerequisite to listening to this sermon is to read Genesis Chapter 27. Pastor Scott referenced last week that the lectionary jumps over a really important piece of Jacob’s story. Maybe because it is a staple of Sunday School lessons, so it is assumed we have some backstory. When I taught this story to 2<sup>nd</sup> graders I kept a piece of fake! fur in the classroom so that we could act out the stealing of the blessing due to the oldest child Esau by the youngest child Jacob. It was quite the drama.

The father Isaac, blind and dying, hoping to bless Esau after eating his favorite stew, Rebekah overhearing this and scheming to make sure that Jacob gets the blessing. When she comes to Jacob with her plan his first word is “Look” so he could have followed that with, “look, Mom that’s a terrible idea” but instead says “look, how are we going to pull this off?” Esau is hairy and I am not. What begins as a sin of omission – Jacob hoping to pass as his brother with his father not noticing becomes a series of sins of commission as Jacob lies directly about who he is, even having his father touch his fur covered arm and neck.

Esau returns right at the moment of no return, the blessing has transferred and it is like that email you send where even if you want to take it back – it is just out there. When the ruse is discovered it says Isaac trembles violently, Esau sobs and pleads for his own blessing, then finds his only consolation in talking to himself about how he will kill his brother. His mother finds out and sends Jacob away to save his life. We need to know all of this, to know why Jacob is alone at the beginning of this passage. Why he has walked until it is too dark to walk anymore and laid down with only a rock by his head as comfort or weapon.

The haphazardness of the choice of where he stops is important here; he just came to this place. He doesn’t seem to have much of a plan. The idea of place matters, the Hebrew word for place shows up three times in the passage, two at the beginning, he came to a place and took a stone of the place. In English we use the word place to mean a lot of things – phrases like, I was in a bad place, or I’ve been all over the place, things feel out of place, which all might describe us or the internal position of Jacob’s spirit. Maybe with a rock for a pillow and a brother coming for his life, he is between a rock and a hard place.

Jacob may be in an ordinary place physically, but he is an extraordinarily difficult place internally. Yet he is able to fall asleep, which seems quite miraculous as I usually don’t sleep

well the first night I am anywhere, let alone outside with a rock by my head. And God comes in a vision of angels ascending and descending a stairway. God experiences, theopanies, often had a visual before a proclamation, and after getting Jacob's attention, God repeats the promise of land, offspring made to Abraham and Isaac, then adds this, "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 wakes up from his sleep and he does not doubt what has happened, surely, he says, "the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it." And then he is moved to put a place holder right there, so he takes his rock, sets it up, pours oil on it and calls it the house of the Lord. He makes the rock monument to God as a sign that something really happened there, and he wants to witness to it. He wants someone to walk by and see a rock that couldn't have gotten up like that on its own, stained with oil, and for someone to wonder what happened that inspired it.

Jacob's creating a rock monument is a first move to hold onto to what he now knows that he didn't know. Maybe he would have preferred a souvenir, to carry that rock with him as a reminder of God's presence and promises, but he can't reasonably do that. He can't stay in the place where he knew God was, but he doesn't need to, because the very next line was – and will keep you wherever you go. Now all the places he ever goes are changed from the encounter, from what he came to know in that place.

Why didn't Jacob know? His surprise in the words "Surely..." and the bible telling us he was afraid show that Jacob has had a transformative experience. We wondered at Bible Study why he didn't know? Why such a surprise? Maybe because he came from a family that had trouble trusting God's promises and often wanted to grasp for it themselves – looking at you Abraham with Hagar and maybe because he came from a family where favoritism and competition obscured God's image in everyone, looking at your, Isaac and Rebekah. But I bet he also heard stories of the risk of leaving home on faith in God's call (something that Jacob is actually reversing on this journey back to Haran) and of the time his grandfather almost tried to kill his Dad but a miracle intervened – okay that is both a troubling and miraculous story to have in your family DNA or when the Lord brought his parents together through a prayer and an act of generosity on his mother's part. I can't imagine that Jacob hasn't known about God and his family's faith stories, in the surprising and disruptive places it was manifest.

I just think that Jacob was unable to access it because of all that had taken place. His family system was complicated and as we know, you can't see what you can't see until you can see it. The blessing system of a "one and done" had such strict rules in the communal and tribal system that a mother and son would plot against a father and a brother. And he couldn't know what he couldn't know – that stealing a blessing is nothing in comparison to the words God can use to bless – until he knew it.

So what helps us be in a place (in and out) to know? Messing up. Getting out of narrow systems. Things that cause us to question who we are in the world, what kind of person we are. A long-expected path being closed off. A conflict. Hurting someone we love. The disappointments and injustice in our family systems, our institutional systems that force us to see. Once we are in that kind of place, we still need something else as well, and that is a recognition of the power of God at work, surely at work.

I wonder if Jacob needed to be asleep for God to get his attention. I wonder if that is the only way he wouldn't push off or turn away from God drawing near. Maybe because he couldn't imagine why God would bother with the likes of him. I wonder how often God wants us to know what we don't know, but we push off or turn away. Something gets us in place, God comes with power, but then we have the work of a quick response. I think the quicker the response the more likely the encounter transforms our depths and not just our surface.

So we can go around making monuments when God breaks through to us, so that we don't forget. What kind of monuments do we make today? At our sunset service, we made one of literal rocks, and you can come see them and add your own to it all week – the instructions are there. We can do it in renewed commitments to practices of faith, of prayer and scripture, to acts of service, with our hands and our resources, to caring for the earth in what we create, don't consume, and recycle, in what we create by writing, music, or art, in allowing forgiveness to transform relationship, and to focus on seeing the humanity of all of God's children, especially those who have been historically oppressed. For me, to do whatever work God calls us to in confronting, if we are white, our privilege of color and access, to education, generational wealth, job opportunities.

What I like about the rock that Jacob rolls up by itself is that it would not have gotten upright in that place were it not for the Lord at work in power in Jacob's life and his response. What I like about all the things I said above is that we, as God's children and God's people, may not have gotten to that place were it not for the Lord at work in power in our lives. Live as people and a church where someone who witnesses our lives says, "I wonder what happened to inspire that"

In what place, today, do you need to know that the Lord is in it with you? In what place today, is the Lord calling you to respond with a life transformed by surety of divine presence? The way to know what we don't know is to put this verse right in our hearts: "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." And if you don't know, now you know. Amen.