

A Holy Land: Gatekeepers and Changemakers Genesis 28:10-19a

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A few years ago, the writer Laura Jean Truman had a tweet reading, “God said, ‘Be still,’ so I ran away extremely fast and made myself extremely busy because I assumed God was waiting to trap me with a Should or a Punishment or a To Do, and when I finally ran out of breath and stopped and hollered, ‘WHAT?!?’ God said, ‘Only this,’ and held me.”¹

We continue with the slippery saga of sly Jacob this week, finding him having “left Beer-sheba.” He didn’t just leave; he ran. This is directly following him having taken Esau’s blessing from blind Isaac, tricking their father via the machinations of their mother. This is Esau having threatened Jacob’s life and Jacob having left behind everything he knew to save his own skin. This is a thief laying down in the desert with nothing but a blessing and a birthright that were never intended to be his, having fled the punishment he was certain was coming.

This is God meeting him after he’s run out of breath and saying, “I have always been with you,” and holding him.

Just as last week, the character of Jacob is hard to pin down. He’s the hero of the story, and the villain of the story, and the put-upon slightly younger sibling, and the scheming usurper, and the one who treasures the blessings with rightful care, and the one who lies to his family to get what isn’t his. He’s not only disgraced himself, it would seem, but the arc of the Abrahamic covenant; Professor Esther Menn points out that, “Jacob’s flight from the southern city of Beer Sheba to the northern city of Haran seems to reverse the celebrated journey of his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, who traveled in faith from their homeland in Haran to the land that God promised their descendants (Genesis 12:1-9).”² And yet he gets this dream and a personalization of the promise of his lineage; far more than a simple father’s blessing, Jacob is told that the God of his forefathers “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.”

Pastor Geoff McElroy describes it as “Jacob’s theophany, the revealing of the God of his ancestors to this person in this time and in this place. It is here that the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac become more than just the promises of the past, but becoming [sic] the promises to him also. The vision of the stairway to heaven, the angels ascending and descending drive home this point: that God is there, present, and standing with Jacob. God is not just off in some cut-off, distant realm but present in the world, active, as signified by the rapid movements of God’s agents coming and going.

“And God promises that this presence is not restricted to just this place, this *beth-el*, this ‘house of God.’ The image of the LORD standing beside Jacob in verse 13 is one that the LORD gives to Jacob to take with him for comfort. Language of protection and providence burst from

¹ Unfortunately, this had already been divorced from its original tweet by the time I discovered the meme. I know it came from Twitter and was retweeted by Randall Warren but have been unable to find the original.

² [Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19a - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2014

the mouth of the LORD towards Jacob: ‘Know that I will be with you...will keep you...will bring you back...I will not leave you’ (Gen 28:15).”³

This trio of sermons about a holy land is, as I mentioned last week, anchored in my having gone to the land we call holy back in February. In a way, it was the opposite of Jacob’s dream here; I wasn’t running from having taken anything, and I was going not to the middle of nowhere but to the birthplace of my own faith. If anything, I should have had dreams upon dreams of staircases and ladders and angels galore as I journeyed *toward* the place God surely would be.

But I didn’t. One of the strongest memories I have is of going to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the tomb where Jesus was buried. It’s a beautiful garden, walled off from the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem around it. The tomb itself is carved out of a sheer rock wall with an entrance that’s been enlarged for all the tourists; the original “door” would only have come up to my waist, and the solid stone that was rolled away was maybe four feet tall but nearly a foot thick. It should have been an incredibly holy place, a Beth-el filled with the presence of God.

And it was, for some people. For me, I could only see that our group took communion together and got little souvenir olive wood cups out of it; I could only see the store you have to walk through on your way out; I could only see the rotation of volunteer tour guides, most of whom are retirees from the United States who feel called to come spend a few months telling tourists like me about how Jesus died to save me from my sins and I should be so grateful for His suffering.

I spent most of my time at the tomb deeply angry, not amazed. I had gone looking for God and felt I did not find Him; Jacob, a liar and a thief, goes running from God and runs smack into Him.

The thing of it is, though, that I was looking for the wrong thing. Holiness, as I mentioned last week, rarely looks like we think it should; we cannot be the gatekeepers of the sacred, deciding when and where and how God appears among us, nor can we outrun the God we think is so ready to scold us. Jacob’s immediate response to the dream is to set up an altar—a very respectful and right thing, but then over the years that nowhere place where the extraordinary happened became a Somewhere that is venerated and expected to be extraordinary. Jacob was acting in good faith after the shock of such a lovely and overwhelming dream, but he took God’s changemaking and made it into a kind of gatekeeping by saying, “God is in *this* place” when God flat out said, “I am wherever you are.”

God is continually doing, that, I’ve found—upending our desire to grab hold of the holy and make it manageable, locatable, a travel destination and a checklist. The very concept of Jesus negates our efforts at such a thing; God came in the person of a carpenter’s son from a backwater town born to an unmarried girl and never had any more power in life than a wandering preacher. Here, in Jacob’s dream, the angels are not doing anything spectacular; they’re simply walking up and down the steps of a ziggurat-like temple, and Professor Julianna Claasens writes that that in itself is the beautiful thing. The staircase was likely “a ramp-like structure that served as a divine sanctuary through which heaven and earth were connected. This stairway to heaven does not give Jacob access to heaven; rather, God speaks to Jacob where he is, denoting God’s immanent

³ [Desert Scribblings: July 20, 2008 – Tenth Sunday After Pentecost \(typepad.com\)](#)

presence rather than a faraway removed God calling from a distance. It is significant that this surprise encounter completely comes from God — breaking into Jacob’s state of sleep which signifies a brief cessation of anxious fleeing.”⁴

“When I finally hollered, ‘What?’” says the meme, says Jacob who had to stop running, said I when everything in the Holy Land felt cheap to me because I wanted a dream of cathedrals and ziggurats, “God said, ‘Only this,’ and held me.”

The sacred is very sneaky; it shows up in the weirdest places, like the mouths of those possessed by demons or the lunch of a young boy in a crowd of 5,000 or the bumbling bravado of a fisherman. It shows up in a desert where grief and confusion force rest and the running has to stop. It shows up in the rocks under our panicked feet and in the altars we set up to contain holiness. It shows up in the dreams where our minds get out of God’s way, and it showed up, even, in Jerusalem.

After the tomb, our tour group made its way to the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden sits midway up one of the hills that curl around Jerusalem and is almost completely overshadowed by the Church of All Nations. That’s a structure that was originally built by the newly-empowered Christians of the fourth century, then rebuilt by the Crusaders after an earthquake destroyed that, and then rebuilt in 1920 after excavations found the original foundations, and then rebuilt after arson damage in 2020. The church is gorgeous in tones of rich blues and deep purples with the symbols of all the nations who helped rebuild it painted on the ceiling; the windows are not picture-filled glass but violet so that the sanctuary is in perpetual shadow, a reminder of the sorrow of the Mount of Olives as Jesus did not run from the anger of those pursuing Him.

Both the church and the garden are very obvious holy places, beautiful in their grief even with the commotion of the tourists winding through. But what stuck with me were the trees; there are olive trees, massive, gnarled things too thick for even three people to get their arms around, in the garden. Olive trees, it turns out, don’t really die unless you kill them; with proper pruning, they grow outward instead of upward and can live *thousands* of years. The trees in the garden range from two to four thousand years old. The people of Jerusalem call them “the silent witnesses” because those olive trees are old enough to have actually been there when Jesus was.

“‘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.’” The oldest tree in Gethsemane is as old as King David when he first took over after the death of Saul; the site of the church on the Mount of Olives was considered a holy space before St. Augustine was converted to Christianity; the stones of Jacob’s desert and Jerusalem’s have been formed and re-formed by millions, if not billions of people running from whatever Esau they fear to find a God Who was right where they were but Whom they couldn’t see until there was nothing else in the way, until they stopped assuming what God wanted from them.

“I will keep you wherever you go,” says God to the man who was born second and lived as though he would never have enough security, wealth, life, love, faith, and Jacob built an altar to say that that specific place was holy, the house of God, because it was. And fourteen miles

⁴ [Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19a - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

away was a different kind of holy, and on a separate continent God was at work for someone else, and thirty years later the messengers were still connecting us to the heavens that birthed us, and in 2023 I went to Jerusalem and was given an olive wood cup while having communion at the place where death was overwhelmed, and neither time nor distance nor greed nor fear have stopped God from reaching out and saying, “I am here, *right here*,” and holding us.

What are you running from that shrouds God from you? Where do you need to stop and fall to pieces so that God can put you back together? Where is the space made holy not because there is an altar there but because God is quietly waiting to tell you to breathe? How can you become changed by the realization that God is in this place and you did not know it? Be there, beloved, and rest. Amen.