

Sermon on Genesis 28:10-19a: Jacob's Ladder

Fr. Joel Steiner -- July 19, 2020

Have you ever found yourself in Jacob's place as he lays down to sleep?

Last week we were introduced to Jacob & Esau, twins whose fighting over their father's blessing began in the womb continued over a bowl of stew. We rejoin them today as Jacob flees their home. He had just tricked his aging, blind father into giving him the blessing. When Esau found out, he was furious and so now Jacob has set off on a 900-kilometre trek to take refuge with an uncle he has never met, in a land he has never visited. As night falls, Jacob lies down with only a stone for a pillow. We aren't told what Jacob is thinking or how he is feeling, but we can guess its outlines. He's in the middle of nowhere, far away from anything that he knows. Will he ever see his family again? Also, what does it mean to bear the firstborn's blessing, if he's betrayed his family and has had to flee the land that God promised to give them? As Jacob lays down to sleep, his life has been turned upside down, and it is unclear if and how God goes with him.

I imagine that in some way we can all relate to Jacob's displacement as he leaves behind the life he knew. Most obviously, we are all dealing with how the pandemic has sent us spinning into the unknown. Even if we are past the initial disorientation of March, walking this road toward the new normal, we still have to weather moments of grief over what we have left behind and fear about what lies ahead. For me, last week's announcement about phase three sent unexpected waves of relief and fear through my week. And of course, for some of us the pandemic is just a backdrop for other displacements that have rearranged your lives: the end of a relationship, the loss of a job, the passing of a loved one. Displaced from our former lives, it is easy to be

impatient for relief, to wonder where God is in the chaos. In these ways we all know Jacob's displacement as he lays down to sleep.

Yet as Jacob sees, God does not abandon us. There is nowhere we can go that God is not already present and working. God shows Jacob this in a dream that might seem a bit odd to us but would have communicated something particular to Jacob.

In his dream, Jacob sees a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. But it isn't a ladder like you and I use, rather, it is what archeologists now call a ziggurat. Here's a picture of one. In Jacob's day, these huge temples were common in the areas of modern-day Iraq and Iran, and Jacob would have at least heard about them. The staircases of these giant temples led up to the realm of the gods, linking the gods and humanity. The priests went up and down these staircases as the messengers of the gods: bringing instructions, offering sacrifices, and helping maintain peace between heaven and earth.

In Jacob's dream, the angels seem to be playing this priestly role as they ascend and descend on the staircase... but then we learn something astonishing: God does not stand at the top of the staircase. Instead, God stands beside Jacob. God then draws Jacob into His promises to Abraham and Isaac and assures Jacob: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God is not in a distant heaven, barely linked to earth. As Jacob goes into the unknown, God goes beside him.

Jacob wakes and exclaims in awe: "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Whatever displacements we are experiencing, God goes with us. This is not only what Jacob realized as he woke up that morning; this is God's promise to us in our baptism. In the waters of baptism, God "seals us with the Holy Spirit and marks us

Christ's own for ever." This is what we remember and celebrate each time we make the sign of the cross. We are Christ's own. Our lives are held in Him.

And like God's promise to Jacob transforms his outlook as he woke up, God's promise to us in baptism invites us to an incredible hope as we greet each new day. Whatever we will face, we will not face it alone. God goes with us. Though we may be disoriented in a foreign land, though suffering may come, we are held and led by the One who has overcome Sin and Death. And God is faithful to His Beloved.