

November 18, 2018

Lesson 12: Jacob Forms a Relationship With God

Scripture: Genesis 28: 10-22

Context:

Today's scripture lesson moves to the flight of younger son Jacob after stealing his brother's birthright and misleading his father. He is on the run away from home and everything he has ever known. The wilderness is now his refuge as he makes his way to relatives that are supposed to welcome him in his exiled state.

For the first time in the story, Jacob experiences God speaking directly to him. Jacob experiences a theophany, a direct encounter with the divine. Theophanic narratives in the scriptures usually take place through dreams, where humans are weaker and their defenses are down as they sleep.¹ As Jacob sleeps, he sees a raised staircase with a foundation on earth that reaches the sky with God's messengers ascending and descending upon it. This "raised staircase" probably refers to something like the Mesopotamian ziggurat, a landmass that was a temple through which earth touches heaven.² The belief in the ancient world was that divine figures could use these land masses to commune with humans and go back and forth.

God uses this unusual massive ladder to come and declare to Jacob that as the God of Jacob's ancestors, God claims Jacob and will be with him wherever he goes. God makes a covenant with Jacob. Jacob, not Esau, becomes the son through which God will do amazing things.

As Jacob awakes, he believes he is standing on holy ground. Like other theophanic narratives in the Bible and the ancient world, places are given legitimacy when something happens there. According to the narrative this is the site of an older shrine from another religious tradition called Luz.³ Yet for the Israelites this will be known as Bethel and will be a future shrine for them to visit. Jacob continues in the cultic act of erecting a sacred pillar, which may reflect an older non-Israelite tradition whereby a tithe would ensure an endowment to ensure its permanent holy status.⁴ He concludes the ritual and promises to claim God through his journey if God keeps God's promises. While there is a definitive change in the trickster Jacob as he makes a covenant with God, there is still the mischievous Jacob as he gives the giant "if." So the audience is still kept in suspense about this character and what he will do next in his journey with God.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1982), 243.

² *Ibid.*, 243.

³ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

Application

As I read this narrative, I was drawn to listen to the song: “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” It’s an African-American slave spiritual that has the singer climbing towards God and reaching those great heights of coming into contact with the divine. I always incorporate the song when I preach this text in worship. One can almost imagine the grandeur and awe what Jacob experienced.

Whenever I read this text something new captures my attention. In the case for today, I am struck by how God reaches out to Jacob even though he has been a part of all this family drama and tension. God promises to be with Jacob even in a period of life that could be perilous or ambiguous. There is not retribution from God and no punitive measures taken. Instead, God tells Jacob that he has been chosen to be the patriarch and that God will be with him wherever he goes. In fact, God promises to protect Jacob as he finds himself away from home and in a foreign land.

Time and time again we read in scripture that God is with people and reassures them not to be afraid. God not only promises blessings for Jacob’s family, God also promises God’s presence with Jacob. God is with those wherever they find themselves.

While I love staying in tune with the news and listen to NPR religiously along with reading the BBC news every morning, from time to time I have to stop listening. I am sure that others do the same whether it is CNN or Fox news. The world seems to delight being in the wilderness and encouraging discourse because of it. World leaders enjoy making teams of “us” versus “them.” Even in the most recent elections in our country, the focus was not upon policies or plans, but on political party affiliation and “who” won.

So I turn off the radio, and notice the other things around me. I see that there are children of different races playing and riding their bikes down the street. I see the police officer standing at the stoplight that is out and assisting with traffic. I see the teenagers going to help elderly neighbors after Hurricane Michael. I go to my office and correspond with people about new ministry projects that God has placed on our hearts.

Then I realize that God is with me; that God is with us. It’s easy to get in the wilderness and to think that the world is a scary and harmful place. From time to time, it may seem like it is and that we are doomed. But as a people of faith, we are to remember that God is with us and to look outside for the “ladders” that God sends our ways. How do you remember that God is with you? What are your places where you have seen God send a ladder with messengers? What time and space do you mark as your own “Bethel,” a place where you experience the divine? These are all questions to consider as we think about how God shows up in our lives even as mischievous as we may be to remind us that God is always there. God is for us and God keeps promises to be wherever we may find ourselves.

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