

Our Conditional Faith in God's Unconditional Love

Genesis 28:10-22

Romans 8:12-25

“And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘...Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’...Then Jacob made a vow saying, ‘If God will be with me, and keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.’”

This morning, we are not only in the middle of the summer; we are also in the middle of a story whose characters invite us to consider our own character. Last Sunday, the character of two nations lurking in the ill-fated relationship of Isaac and Rebekah’s twins provoked us to think about the character of our own nation lurking in the characters of those who lead it. This morning, we have only one character to consider, one brother who is alone, in a certain place, in the dark. One man who is about to come face to face with God. “The story of Jacob’s dream,” David Steinmetz writes, “is the story of a frail and sinful human being, frightened and homesick, exhausted by his hurried journey from Beersheba, overtaken by nightfall in the midst of an empty field, uncertain of the future toward which he is drawn by this own decisions and the providence of his father’s God.”

We pick up the story when Jacob left. He left Isaac and Rebekah who prompted his journey: his mother warning him of his twin’s murderous desire for revenge; his father commanding Jacob to go up to Padan Aram to find a wife among Abraham’s descendants. Jacob left Esau, whose plaintive cry in the aftermath of his brother’s deception (“Have you only one blessing father?”) will haunt Jacob day and night until they meet again. Jacob left the house of his birth not knowing where he was going, just as his grandfather Abraham had left country and kindred and his father’s house not knowing where he was going, except for the fact that Abraham went as the Lord told him. Jacob left as an exile from his family and from himself. The quiet man, the homebody, the mama’s boy vanished. Jacob left.

What strikes me is the immediate vulnerability of this character who had seemed so completely in control of his destiny at the beginning of the story. Playing on his brother’s weakness a week ago, he tricked Esau out of his birthright. Taking advantage of his father’s age and blindness under his mother’s tutelage, as I told the children this morning, he had gotten Isaac’s one and only blessing. But when Jacob left, without his bag of tricks, he left as a defenseless fugitive about to run unwittingly into the arms of God’s love. In his unauthorized biography of God, John Shea writes about the coincidence of human vulnerability and God’s visitation. “When we reach our limits,” he begins, “when our ordered worlds collapse, when we cannot enact our moral ideals, when we are disenchanting, we often enter into the awareness of Mystery. We are inescapably related to this Mystery which is immanent and transcendent, which issues invitations we must respond to, which is ambiguous about its intentions, and which is real and important beyond all else. Our dwelling within Mystery is both menacing and promising, a relationship of exceeding darkness and undeserved light.” Human vulnerability intensified, it seems to me and in the first place, is the necessary and prior condition that readies Jacob—that readies any of us—to run unwittingly into the arms of God’s unconditional love.

“He came to a certain place,” the text tells us next. The rabbis imagined Jacob’s certain place to be Mt. Moriah. Looking back, it was where Jacob’s father had been bound by his father. Looking ahead, it was “the future place of the Holy Temple, of prayer and sacrifice, of the human attempt to come close to God.” Think about the first night you spent as a young adult at a literal and figurative distance from the people who had been telling you who you were since the day you were born; or the first night you spent alone after a marriage ended, a spouse died, a diagnosis sank in. Suspended between past and future with nothing to tether you to the earth. “It is a place of purity and danger,” Aviveh Gottlieb Zornberg writes, “of great longing and strict distancing.” In the second place, then, God encounters us in the “between places where nothing is expected ... [where] everything is risky.”

In this certain place, the sun sets and Jacob falls asleep. The third condition for our coming face to face with the unconditional love of God is darkness. Personally, I would have been awake the whole night had I been in Jacob’s sandals. Alone in dark and fearful places, I am nothing if not vigilant! “The waking effort,” Zornberg says, “is to know, not to miss any detail, to absorb all knowledge into conscious, cognitive life.” “But,” she goes on, “God wants this sleep. [God] stage-manages the abrupt darkness so that Jacob will sleep and dream here...[because]...darkness is a way of knowing God.” Likewise, Walter Brueggemann observes that the encounter of Jacob with God takes place “not in wakeful control but in a time of vulnerable yielding, while he is asleep.”

As Calvin's heirs, you and I are prone to think reasonable thoughts about God in the light of day. Belief is the waking effort not to miss any detail, to absorb all knowledge into our conscious cognitive lives; to fit the possibility of God into a scientific world view, for instance, rather than fit the world into the relationship of exceeding darkness and undeserved light for which we were made. Perhaps that is why we worship God in the morning when we are most alert and thoughtful, when we are least vulnerable to emotion and the fancies of human imagination. Perhaps that is also why worship in our tradition can be so unengaging and controlled and boring!

But in this story, God stage-manages the setting sun and the encroaching darkness because, at the end of the day and in the darkness, we are more undone by the things that we ought not to have done than self-important about the things we have done; we are less prone to cover-up our broken parts or hide the gaping wounds in our hearts and more inclined to beseech than to bemoan the shadows. Darkness compounds our vulnerability. Shabbat, after all, begins at sunset. Evensong as well. At the end of the day and in the darkness, God knows that our fears paradoxically will open us to the joy of a meeting. "If Jacob had not slept, he would not have dreamed of God and angels, would not have received his first message from God, and would not know that this [certain place] is a holy place." [Zornberg]

Utterly vulnerable, in a certain place, far from home, in the dead of night, Jacob dreams of a ladder, more likely a ramp, set up on the earth that reaches to heaven. Angels of God are ascending and descending on it. Heaven—the place from which God comes to us—is having to do with earth, with Jacob's world of fear and terror, of loneliness and guilt. Having gotten his attention, the angels of the Lord give way to the Lord who, in person, stands beside Jacob and says to Jacob what Jacob could only hear alone, at a distance from the known, in the darkness. God says, "I am with you." The words are the heart of the biblical faith, words that God continues to say and be to God's people in wilderness and exile, to the Gentiles in God's son, God's only son, God's beloved, and to the church through God's Spirit: "Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Then God says, "I will keep you wherever you go." Think Psalm 121: "The Lord is thy keeper....He will keep you from all evil....He will keep your soul...The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this day forth and even forevermore." Think Psalm 91: "For he will give his angels charge of you to keep you in all your ways....When she calls to me, I will answer her; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him." Think the 23rd Psalm from beginning to end. "Jacob hears in God's words," Zornberg says, "a concern for the vulnerability of human existence that needs protection at every point." To wit, soon we will sing: "When through the deep waters I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with you in trouble to bless and sanctify to you your deepest distress." That is to say, when death is in hot pursuit of you, the God to whom you belong in life and in death will keep you.

Finally God says, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." I cannot help but hear those words as words that became sayable on the other side of the grave by him whose love was no longer conditioned by death. Emmanuel, God-with-Us, assumed our vulnerability. Jesus left. He left his dwelling with God to dwell alone in the darkness, at a certain place, a risky place named Golgotha, so that we need never again dwell alone in the darkness, even in the darkness of the grave. The God we meet face to face in Jesus Christ is the God whose promise to be with us, to accompany and keep us, will leave us only when he presents us, perfectly ourselves, before the throne of grace.

Jacob's response to God's unconditional love? Adding an "if," *he* vows to trust in God conditionally. Jacob rose early in the morning and said, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God." Jacob said this in the morning. It was a waking effort to know, not to miss any detail, to be reasonable about God's presence and help. We do the same. If God keeps us in the ways we want to be kept, then God shall be our God. If God is absent, *to our way of thinking*, when the bread runs out, the closet is empty, the homecoming delayed, then we will rage against our vulnerability, miss those certain places of risk and avoid the darkness as though God's love were as conditional as our own.

Night will soon fall again around Jacob and he will wrestle until break of day with a stranger whose name turns out to be love. "Did you know," Rilke asks, "that joy is, in reality, a terror whose outcome we don't fear? We go through terror from beginning to end, and that precisely is joy. A terror about which you know more than the beginning. A terror in which you have confidence." A terror who turns out to be the living God standing beside you. Thanks be to God.