

“All In”
Genesis 28:10-22
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July 23, 2017

Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran.
He reached a certain place and spent the night there.
When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it under his head.
Then he lay down there.
He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God’s messengers were ascending and descending on it.

Suddenly the Lord was standing on it and saying,
*“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.
I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.
Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth;
you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south.
Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants.
I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go,
and I will bring you back to this land.
I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”*

When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself,
The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn’t know it.
He was terrified and thought,
*This sacred place is awesome.
It’s none other than God’s house and the entrance to heaven.*

After Jacob got up early in the morning, he took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it.
He named that sacred place Bethel, though Luz was the city’s original name.

Jacob made a solemn promise:
*“If God is with me and protects me on this trip I’m taking,
and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear,
and I return safely to my father’s household,
then the Lord will be my God.
This stone that I’ve set up as a sacred pillar will be God’s house,
and of everything you give me I will give a tenth back to you.”*

We have before us another messy story from Genesis.
 The generation that fought inside Rebekah's womb has continued to cause strife.
 Not only has Jacob stolen Esau's birthright, but now he has stolen his blessing.
 He has plotted and schemed, alongside his mother, to take what isn't his.
 So now, to remain out of Esau's angry reach, Jacob has to flee.
 And this is where we encounter him today--
 Alone.
 Far from home.
 In exile.

Forced by nightfall to stop, Jacob finds a plot of ground to rest on, and a stone for his head.

I wonder what he was thinking as he fell asleep that night.
Was he pleased with himself and all that he had gained?
Did he regret how he treated his twin brother?
Did he miss the comforts of home?
Did he long for the embrace and presence of his mother?
 Maybe he thought none of these things and hoped only to get some rest.
 Which we hear, he does.

While Jacob sleeps, he dreams.
 He dreams a vivid scene of God's messengers ascending and descending between earth and heaven.
 And there in the middle of it all, God speaks.
God speaks directly to Jacob.
 To this man who has behaved badly.
 Who has cheated his own family.
 Fled from home.
 Avoided the consequences of his actions.
 In the great story of Abraham's descendants, his grandson Jacob behaves like one of the villains.
 His actions haven't been pure.
 His path hasn't been straight.

But we know that people are more complex than being just one thing or another.
 Our actions don't always represent our best selves,
 even if those around us might try to let our missteps define us.
 And it is often in the dark moments of exile and darkness that God demonstrates that he is all in with us.
 No matter what.

A few months ago I read an obituary that has wedged itself into my mind. The obituary was for Joshua Daniel Bishop of Macon, GA, a young man who died at 41. The fact that I was even reading this was surprising, as obituaries aren't usually written for those executed on death row.

But one of Josh's lawyers felt compelled to write the story of his life.

Oddly enough, this attorney had been a classmate of his in sixth grade, so she had known Josh in another chapter of his life.

The eight-paragraph recap of his life told the story of a "Dickensian childhood in the modern era."¹

I want to share a few excerpts with you.

"[Josh] grew up under bridges in Milledgeville, Georgia, in group homes and foster care, often hungry or afraid [...]

Everyone who knew him as a boy recalls his sweetness, eagerness to help others, and his devotion to his mother.

Unlike the street urchins of the Dickens stories, however, Josh was never saved by a kindly, wealthy gentleman—or even by the State agencies charged with protecting abused children.

Instead, he fell into drug and alcohol abuse and at age 19 made horrible mistakes that were not otherwise in his character.

His addiction, and what came of it, cost him his life [...].

In the bleak and alienated world of Georgia's Death Row, however, Josh found that he could be loved by others and by God,

and he came to flourish there as an artist and as a man....

[He learned] that no is one beyond the reach of forgiveness and redemption.

He was baptized as a Catholic.

In his last years, working with a clinic at Mercer Law School, he taught close to fifty students lessons about justice that they could never learn in a classroom.

He offered abject apologies to the families of his victims,

and was comforted in the grace offered by a number of those he had hurt.

His heart bled for children who lived without hope for a better life, and did what he could to encourage teenagers who struggled with bitterness or apathy.

From his prison cell, Josh reached others with his kind and open heart.

He bore others up.

He made the world better.

¹ <http://www.macon.com/news/local/article72267012.html>

In his last hours, Josh comforted his friends, prayed with us, reminded us to take care of one another, and sang "Amazing Grace."

He hoped that his death would "take away from the pain and add to the peace" of those he had hurt.

His continued concern for the suffering of others while he faced the ultimate penalty showed that the evil the State wanted to stamp out was not there, and all that was lost was the potential of a redeemed soul to do good.

If there is justice in heaven, if not on earth, he is painting with Rembrandt and humming along with Merle Haggard."

How often do we find ourselves in dark moments and bleak places and assume that God cannot find us there?

How quick are we to put limits on God's love and forgiveness for others, drawing lines around those we deem unworthy?

If I'm being honest, I fall into that kind of thinking often.

It's tempting to want to define who God loves and forgives and who God surely can't.

Or as one author says,

"You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."²

But Jacob's encounter with the living, active God reminds us God operates differently than we do.

Not only does God initiate connection with us -

This God is ALL IN with us.

No matter what.

And as Romans 8 reassures us,

"nothing can separate us from God's love...

not death or life,

not angels or rulers,

not present things or future things,

not powers

or height or depth

or any other thing that is created."³

Not lying.

Not cheating.

Not even murder.

² Anne Lamott, "Traveling Mercies."

³ Romans 8:38-39

In our story from Genesis, we see that God comes to Jacob, no conditions necessary. God speaks to him.

Reassures him of the promise of descendants.

And as with Josh Bishop, God shows him that he won't be alone.

There will be a place for him.

People for him.

And opportunities to respond to God's unfailing acceptance.

As Jacob wakes from his dream, as he lifts his head up, he's terrified.

But he's also in awe.

How could I have not seen it before? he wonders.

The Lord has been with him in that place, all along!

And prompted by this experience, Jacob names the place and claims it as holy.

But that's not the end of the story.

Jacob's journey will still ebb and flow.

He won't always get things right.

He will continue to have moments of doubt and disobedience.

But I would argue that his experience at Bethel has centered him, and will continue to pull him back into a relationship with the divine over and over again.

A quick story as a I close:

In a church, in another city, a new Sunday school year began one fall.

Among the offerings for adults was a class entitled "Spiritual Formation".

After the class had been going for several weeks, a woman in the church asked the teacher if it would be alright if she joined the class.

The teacher said,

"Of course, it's fine! Why would you ask?"

The woman answered,

"Well, I am 94 years old, and I just wondered if it were too late for me."⁴

As imperfect and broken people, we, too, are given new chances to connect with the divine.

Week after week as we return to this place we call holy,

we open ourselves to God's grace and acceptance.

We try new things.

⁴ Heidi Husted, "Matters of the Heart," Christian Century, August, 2000

Take on new challenges.

And we give into the Biblical promise of unfailing love from a God who isn't the least bit scared to meet us just where we are, in the mess of daily life.

Today.

Tomorrow.

And so far down that road that we can only dream of it now.