



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 11 (A)

A Rock, a Ladder, a Promise

[RCL] Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23 or Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

A rock, a ladder, and a promise to a man who is running for his life. That is what we get in our story from Genesis today. Jacob is in a very bad situation. He stole not only his brother Esau's birthright, but also his blessing, and Esau has finally had enough. He resolves in Genesis 27 to set aside a decent time of mourning for his father Isaac, but once it is over, he will kill Jacob. Rebekah finds out and tells Jacob he needs to get out of town, fast. So, Jacob sets out.

There is very little that is admirable about Jacob. Even his name means "cheater," and he lives up to it every time. We might even question why God keeps providing for him, why God continues to come through for him, why God chooses him to be the vessel through which the entire nation of Israel will be built.

We should take God's choice of Jacob as great good news. Why? Because it takes away the burden and the illusion of personal worthiness being necessary for us to serve God. Jacob doesn't learn much throughout his life. His life with his children is equally as troubled and poorly managed as his life with his brother and his parents, and he seems to gain little self-awareness throughout it.

But none of that matters. Here, at his lowest moment, fleeing the righteous wrath of his brother, having racked up one terrible sin after another and not showing any repentance for them, God comes to him and promises him amazing things.

It is so easy for us to think that we'll listen for the call of God to do something great once we've got our lives together. We just need to organize a few more things, get rid of a few more bad habits, get through this difficult situation, get a new job or a new partner or a new house, and *then* we'll be ready to answer God's call. This story reminds us that it is actually right in the midst of our sin and fear and brokenness that the call comes. God reaches out to us when we're most lost and promises the world to us.

We've all been where Jacob is on this night. He is out in the wilderness, alone, afraid, wondering if his brother will come on him in the night and kill him. Perhaps our personal circumstances have not been

quite as extreme as Jacob's, but imagine how he felt trying to get to sleep that night. He had so few resources that he had to take a rock as a pillow.

How many times have you lain in bed at night, so full of worry and despair that your pillow feels like a rock? You can't get comfortable and relax no matter how you toss and turn because the turmoil in your mind is tying your body in knots. And the worst is when, like Jacob, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We have created the circumstances that have driven us into such a lonely and frightening place.

And then comes the amazing dream. What strange specificity, the ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending! The image of the ladder has captured the imagination of artists throughout the centuries and is immortalized in music and folklore. The obvious implication of the ladder to heaven is that we are meant to climb it, to advance in spiritual wisdom and virtue toward the realm of God.

But God never asks Jacob or anyone else to climb the ladder. The meaning is actually the opposite. "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it," the text says. But look at the very next verse: "And the LORD stood beside him." Where is God? At the top of the ladder, looking down and making proclamations, urging us to climb up? No! God has come *down* the ladder to Jacob.

This is a profound theological moment in the Hebrew Scriptures that stands on its own, but we as Christians looking at it through our own lens can't help but think of the Incarnation. God descending from heaven, coming down to our level, standing right beside us to guide us and to promise to be with us—that is the very story of Jesus Christ being born as a human and dwelling with us.

And Jacob, a man whose spiritual senses have never been keen, understands the significance of what he is experiencing. "Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it!'" He responds to this profound experience by turning the stone that was his pillow into a monument. This is a very human impulse—we see it across cultures. But our monuments in stone can change meaning over time as we reconsider the history that they commemorate.

If you've ever traveled to South Dakota, you may have seen the presidential carving on Mount Rushmore. What was designed to provoke patriotism is now causing many people to reconsider what these monuments actually mean. The Black Hills are lands that are sacred to the indigenous peoples who live there. Not satisfied with taking their land from them, white people then decided to carve the faces of their oppressors into the side of a sacred mountain in their most spiritually significant lands.

The hardest part about it is that there is no way to fix it. There are a number of things we can do here and now to be aware of and work toward ending the profound economic depression and high levels of unemployment, poor health care, and low education outcomes on American Indian reservations. But no matter what we do now, nothing can erase the painful past, the history of genocide followed by the final

insult and humiliation of white people carving up a sacred mountain with the faces of white people. It would be like someone came into a church, tore down the altar, and used the wood to build an outhouse.

If you've traveled through the American West, you quickly realize how much bigger the land is than these small, prideful monuments. How puffed up and arrogant we human beings are, thinking to create lasting edifices to our greatness carved in stone, when they are a drop in the bucket compared to the greatness of God painted across the landscape in great splashes of beauty and glory.

It was very comforting to see and understand that no small, self-important monument holds a candle to the magnificence of God's artistry in the land, and the land's holiness could never really be damaged by human actions. Long after Mount Rushmore is worn away by wind and water and time, the glory of the Lord will be revealed every morning in the dawn over the mountains. And so we can say, "Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it!... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

God promises to redeem all things in the fullness of time. God surrounds the sin and destruction that we humans bring everywhere we go, with beauty and love and the promise of healing. God promises that the sin and death of our American history will one day be redeemed: "Know that I am with you and 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." That is a promise not just to Jacob and not just to us, but to all the peoples of the earth who have been driven from their homes and cast out as refugees, including our siblings in war-torn countries around the world today.

Jacob took the rock that was the hard and unyielding pillow for his head in a desolate place and declared it a holy monument. Perhaps we too will one day learn to quit carving stones to our own imagined greatness, but consecrate the stones of our lonely and broken places, knowing they are the surest route to God.

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to *Lectionary Homiletics*, the *Young Clergy Women's Project* journal *Fidelia's Sisters*, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church's Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women's theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she's not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you'll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website *Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers* (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).