

July 23, 2017
Proper 11, Year A
Genesis 28:10-19

Finding God at Work in the Mess

Last week after church my husband Andrew was not happy with my message. “Jacob is a jerk! Tricksters are sneaky and conniving.” He was talking about my argument that God loves tricksters, that God shows a preference for wily underdogs like Jacob. But why?

It’s a question we have to wrestle with again in Genesis since Jacob’s special connection with God becomes undeniable. God likes this guy.

Just a side note: if you are listening to these parables in Matthew and really wishing I would talk about the harvest and coming judgment, have no fear. While I’m preaching on Genesis this summer, there is so much more judgment to come in Matthew this fall. There will be plenty of time to dig into the place of fire where there is gnashing of teeth and whatnot.

But for the meantime, I’m sticking with the family drama of Genesis and there hasn’t been anyone quite as dramatic up to this point as Jacob. His son Joseph will give him a run for his money, but for now it’s Jacob’s antics that make us wonder what God is up to.

First of all, some context. Jacob in this story is on the run. He has to leave the Promised Land because of some mischief I explained last week. He stole his father’s blessing by impersonating his older brother, Esau. It was a pretty elaborate hoax and Esau is furious. Stealing a blessing is pretty egregious and I’m sure Jacob has done little to ingratiate himself to his older brother, who by rights of the primogenitor laws is the more powerful son. His life is literally in danger.

So, Jacob flees with absolutely nothing to his name. He is a younger son, alone, banished from his home. And, it is in this state that he falls asleep with only a stone for his pillow.

As he sleeps, he dreams, and in that dream, he sees activity – movement from heaven to earth, back and forth. And then God speaks to him; God says words familiar to us who have been following God’s relationship with Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather. God tells Jacob that the land is his; that his descendants will be without number; and that these descendants will be a blessing to all the world.

But again, why Jacob? Why this trickster whose trickery has left him deservedly friendless and on his own?

I don’t really know. The God we know from scripture is not a God we can control. God keeps God’s promises, but in God’s own way and in God’s own time. It’s never as we would expect it or necessarily want it.

But there is something I can say. Jacob doesn’t have this strange vision of the world, as a place of both human and divine activity, until he fled, until he was banished and alone. He didn’t see God and God’s angels at work in the world until he had nothing but a stone upon which to lay his head.

Those of us who have much, those of us who are privileged, who have homes and pillows, and soft beds, are frequently at a loss to find God in the world we live in. Christena Cleveland, a professor at Duke Divinity School wrote in a recent blog post that she was struck by the response of many of the faithful but quite privileged people she knew after the 2016

presidential election¹. They were devastated, broken, and crushed. “Where is God in all of this?” one woman asked her.

Dr. Cleveland sympathized with the pain of these white and middle class privileged people, but noted that this response was decidedly less hopeful than many people with significantly less privilege.

Privileged people, she said (and she included herself) tend to find God in transcendence – retreats in beautiful places, yoga class, mountain hikes, sunsets. We find God in transcendent moments of triumph when humanity rises above its petty concerns and comes together in dramatic fashion. We struggle to find God in the mess and chaos of human existence because we strive to shield ourselves from it. We strive to shield ourselves from pain and failure.

Those without privilege face hunger, housing crises, violence. They have to find God in the midst of life even when it isn’t going well, even when life just serves up another obstacle or another disaster. The 2016 election wasn’t a crisis of faith for them, it was just another day, a day that God made.

And it’s not that God doesn’t show up in beautiful places – in nature, sunsets, moments of triumph; it’s that when we focus solely on a transcendent experience of God, we miss the God of the everyday, the God who gets down in the mud and muck of life; the God who is present especially in times of failure, especially in times of defeat. This is the God we know in the incarnation, the God we know in Jesus.

I’m not sure that God prefers Jacob because he’s a trickster; perhaps God finds it easier to reach Jacob because all Jacob has are his tricks and when those run out, he has nothing.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/blog/christena-cleveland-so-much-of-the-privileged-life-is-about-transcendence/>

When I did my Rendezvous with the Rector – these small group discussions I had with the parish at the end of June – I asked about what social justice meant to people since activism for social justice is such a key part of St. Thomas’ identity. Several people said that they’d like to know more about the spiritual underpinnings of social justice activism. Why, as Christians, do we care about housing policy, or criminal justice reform, or immigration? Why do we hang controversial banners outside the church that say, “Black Lives Matter” and “Immigrants and Refugees Welcome”?

This is a good question and I hope that we will continue to explore it and answer it over the years we are together. But today I’ll say this: we don’t have stone pillows; we aren’t fleeing for our lives; we don’t have nothing to our name. It’s not that we don’t have our own very real problems, but we, as a group, are more like the older brother – the ones who have inherited. We are not Jacob; but we can stand with Jacob. We can refuse to avert our eyes from pain; we can refuse to make peace with oppression.

The world is teeming with angels. We acknowledge this reality every time we say the Lord’s Prayer: Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Whenever we say that prayer I want you to picture the scene from Jacob’s dream – an ordinary place, any Denver street, a grocery store, a parking lot, a traffic jam, the neighborhood that is somehow immune to Denver’s fast paced growth and success. Imagine these places as locations where God can be at work.

We will never see this, never really experience the earth as holy, as God filled, if we seek God only in the highs, in the good times, the places cleared of everything painful and ugly. Turn toward the pain of this world, the ones who are hurting because their luck ran out and they’re

out of options. That's why we care about social justice, because we know that God is there ahead of us, moving between heaven and earth, at home in the world and at home us, even and especially in our pain, messiness, and imperfection.