

Foundational Stories Series
“How a Simple Stone Becomes an Altar”
Sermon on Genesis 28:10-22 (7/26 & 7/27/14)
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When I'm sleeping, it's common for me to have quite vivid dreams. In fact, this summer, I'm watching my way through the original *Law & Order* series on Netflix – often watching an episode or two not long before I go to bed.

I enjoy the crime drama quite a bit, but I'm noticing the show is inspiring for me some strange – and often horrifying – dreams. (Of course, the dreams haven't gotten so bad so frequently that I've quit watching *Law & Order* before bedtime!)

Well, today's story from Genesis chapter 28 is all about a vivid dream. Not a vivid, crime drama-inspired dream, of course, but a vivid dream nonetheless. Before we get into today's story, however, let's remember where we've been so far this month in the book of Genesis...

In the first week of our *Foundational Stories* sermon series, we heard the story of how God created the heavens and the earth. After that, we started getting acquainted with Abraham and his family.

As the book of Genesis tells us, Abraham is the first person who chose to be in relationship with our God: God invited Abraham to be in relationship, and Abraham said “yes.”

Because Abraham said “yes” to God, God promised Abraham three things: land, descendants, and blessing – not just that his descendants would *be* blessed, but that *they* would be a blessing. This promise was carried-on through Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac.

Last week, we met Isaac's dysfunctional family: his wife, Rebekah, and their twin sons, Esau and Jacob. I won't go into great detail here, but, the stories we heard last week were the story of how Jacob tricked his older twin, Esau, into giving him his birthright...and the story of how Rebekah helped Jacob trick his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau.

That's where we've been the last few weeks of this series. And, as I've said these last weeks, the reason it's important for us to get to know this biblical family is because they are the family that became the Jewish people – the Israelites, Jesus' own people. Since we Christians are followers of Jesus, *this* family is our family.

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Now, you have probably been just waiting on the edge of your seat to find out what those little stones are for, right? At the beginning of worship, I told you I'd eventually fill you in...and I'll get there, I promise.

At any rate, now that we've remembered what came *before* today's reading, I want to revisit the actual reading through the words of Barbara Brown Taylor – an Episcopal priest who is one of my favorite Christian writers.

Several years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book called *An Altar in the World* that very quickly became one of my favorite books. Toward the beginning of this book, she writes about the story of Jacob and his dream of the ladder between earth and heaven.

I'm going to read this section of her book to you – it's a bit lengthy, so do your best to pay careful attention. I'd encourage you to take that stone you got as you walked in and put it in your hand: hold onto the stone as I read these words about today's story from Genesis.

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Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “The first time I read Jacob's story in the Bible, I knew it was true whether it ever happened or not. There he was, still a young man, running away from home because his whole screwy family had finally imploded. His father was dying. He and his twin brother, Esau, had both wanted their father's blessing. Jacob's mother had colluded with [Jacob] to get it, and though his scheme worked, it enraged his brother to the point that Jacob fled for his life.

“[Jacob] and his brother were not identical twins. Esau could have squashed him like a bug. So Jacob left with little more than the clothes on his back, and when he had walked as far as he could, he looked around for a stone he could use for a pillow.

“When he had found one the right size, Jacob lay down to sleep, turning his cheek against the stone that was still warm from the sun. Maybe the dream was in the stone, or maybe it fell out of the sky. Wherever the dream came from, it was vivid: a ladder set up on the earth, with the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending it like bright-winged ants.

“Then, all of a sudden, God was there beside Jacob, without a single trumpet for warning, promising him safety, children, land. 'Remember, I am with you,' God said to him. 'I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

“Jacob woke while God's breath was still stirring the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him: same wilderness, same rocks, same sand. If someone had held a mirror in front of his face, Jacob would not have seen anything different there either, except for the circles of surprise in his eyes.

“‘Surely the Lord is in this place,’ he said out loud, ‘and I did not know it!’ Shaken by what he had seen, he could not seem to stop talking. ‘How awesome is this place!’ he went on. ‘This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

“It was one of those dreams he could not have made up. [And] even if Jacob could never find the exact place where the feet of that heavenly ladder came to earth – even if he could never find a single angel footprint in the sand –

“his life had been changed for good ... What really happened? God knows. All Jacob knew was that he had to mark the spot. Looking around for something that would do the trick, he spotted the obvious choice: his stone pillow, lying right where he had left it, although the sand around it was churned up from his unusual night's sleep.

“First he dug a sturdy footing for the stone. Then he stood it up, ladderlike, and set it into place. Then he poured oil on it and gave it a name: Bethel, House of God. Looking back at it as he walked away, he saw a stone finger rooted in the earth, pointing straight up to the sky.”¹

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This entire story is extremely striking to me. Jacob's dream was both vivid and strange...I've had some strange dreams in my time on earth, but I've never dreamed about a ladder between earth and heaven, covered in angels going upon and down it. It was, indeed, a strange dream. What is most strange to me, however, is Jacob's reaction *to* his dream.

In the dream, God had clearly offered to Jacob the same promise God had made to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham. In the dream, God had said to Jacob, “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 be like the dust of the earth, and ... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.”

“I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...”

Pretty clear, don't you think? Yet mere moments after waking, Jacob said, “*If* God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, *then* the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

God had JUST said to Jacob, “I *am* with you” and “I *will* watch over you,” yet Jacob woke up and vowed, “*If* God will be with me” and “*if* God will watch over me...*then* the Lord will be my God.”

Either Jacob was suffering some pretty extreme short-term memory loss or he was experiencing a basic human issue: lack of trust.

God's promise to Jacob was not conditional – just as it was not conditional with Abraham – yet Jacob is suspicious: God, *if*, you provide for me, *then* I will know you are with me and *then* I'll give back to you in thanksgiving.

It seems kind of impertinent of Jacob, in my humble opinion. But, as much as we might hate to admit it, don't we do this, too, sometimes?

1 Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. pp. 2-4.

“God, *if* you do this for me – *if* you heal my sister, *if* you bless my marriage, *if* you find me a job, *if* you give me children...*if* you make things just a little easier – then will I believe you really are with me always...and then will I respond with my gratitude and with my gifts.”

It may *seem* a little different, but these kinds of bargains with God are exactly the same as the bargain Jacob made with God that morning so many thousands of years ago.

Even though, in his dream-vision about the ladder to heaven, God had outright promised to be with Jacob always – wherever he went – Jacob wasn't able to trust that promise. Lack of trust. It's a common human problem, right? I know I struggle with it...and I have a sneaking suspicion I'm not the only one in this room who does.

Yet, even though Jacob didn't quite trust the promise God had just made to him, Jacob knew without a doubt he had had an encounter with the living God – and he knew he had to do *something* to commemorate that encounter...he knew he had to do something to recognize that holy place.

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“Bethel” is a Hebrew word meaning “house of God.” That Jacob named the place of his dream “Bethel” was his way of saying, “This is a place where God lives. I know it because I experienced God in this very spot, on this very ground.”

So he made an altar: he took the stone that had been his pillow during the dream-vision...and he set it up to mark the spot of that holy encounter.

That's really all an altar is, right? A thing that marks the place where encounters with God have happened...that's an altar.

We have an altar here in this sanctuary. In fact, today we have *two* altars in this sanctuary. We have the large, white marble one near our big window – fittingly decorated with an additional stone altar, possibly like the one Jacob created in today's story.

Today we also have a smaller, wooden altar set-up. This wooden altar table is, today, home to the bread and cup that, in just a few minutes, will become for us the body and blood of Christ when we celebrate Holy Communion.

Both of these altar tables mark the spot where holy encounters have happened – because this sanctuary is a place of holy encounters. At least I certainly hope it is for you! That's why we come here, isn't it? That's what worship is primarily about, isn't it – holy encounters?

But we have all sorts of “altars” in our lives – all sorts of places we have marked as holy ground...places where we know, without a doubt, we had a life-changing encounter with the living God.

One such altar might be a campfire ring where you sang songs of faith years ago. Another one might be the place where you met – or even where you buried – the love of your life. Your family table might be something of an altar in your home. Or perhaps one of your altars is the chair you sit on to watch the sunset when you're at the lake.

Or maybe there is a hospital bed somewhere that was an altar for you as you sat next to a loved one and encountered God's steadfast presence while I.V.s dripped and vital signs beeped across a digital screen nearby.

Our lives are marked by all sorts of altars – all sorts of places in this world where we have had an encounter with the living God. And I suspect Jacob wanted so badly to make his own altar at the site of his holy encounter because he wasn't sure where – or even *if* – the next encounter would take place. Yet...what about that promise of God?

Yes, there are indeed places where we encounter God's presence in an incredibly powerful way – and those places are worthy of our memory. But the promise was that God would be with Jacob wherever he went. It's a promise that God makes to each and every one of *us*, too...and it's a promise that can, indeed, be life-changing.

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Because things get tough and life in this world can certainly present its share of challenges, we cannot rely on the memory of past encounters with God as a way of getting us through the day. Yes, memory is a gift...but don't we need constant reminders of God's presence?

The altars of our past are beautiful places and we can go back to them in our mind whenever we want to...and we can come to this place and its altars week after week to be reminded of God's life-changing presence with us. But memories, and even weekly worship, are not sufficient.

Which brings us to what is what those stones are for: they are meant to be something of a “portable altar.”

If you received or took one of the stones, I understand some of you may not want to leave here with it. But, I hope you'll at least *consider* taking one with you. Drop it in your purse or throw it in your pocket with your loose change...maybe you could put it in a cup holder in your car.

Put it somewhere you might regularly see or feel it...somewhere that, when you lay your eyes on it or your fingers graze it, you'll be able to say to yourself, “Oh, yes, that's right – God is with me, even right now.” Such a small reminder may not lead to a powerful encounter with the living God...but, even a *small* reminder can be life-changing.

Even a small stone like these can remind us that, wherever we are, we're at Bethel – the house of God. And when it hits you that you're in the house of God, everything seems different...because where God is, there is hope. No matter what. Amen.