

Genesis 28:10-21

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain **place** and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the **place**, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 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." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this **place**—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this **place**! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that **place** Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "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, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Matthew 13:24-30

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "(546)

Jacob had just discovered what Abraham had discovered two generations earlier—and he was so proud of himself for doing so.

Granted, he had a lot to be proud of recently. He'd recently bargained his way into the birthright that had been his older brother's, wresting it from him for the low, low price of some stew. More recently, he'd tricked his old, blind father into giving him the family blessing, which also rightly should have gone to Esau. He'd disguised himself as hairy Esau, putting on hairy skins, which blind old Isaac would touch for confirmation that he had the right son. "The voice is Jacob's," Isaac said, weary and suspicious, "but the arms are Esau's," he said, resigned and with little reason to ask for corroboration from, say, his wife. She was behind the trick in the first place. (Isaac loved Esau best, man of the field that he was, man of the hunt, but Rebekah loved Jacob, man of the tents, making his stew, stirring the pot.)

For all this, he'd had to leave home. Esau swore he'd kill Jacob once their father had died, which it seemed would be soon. Isaac was in feeble condition according to one thread of this story. And when Rebekah had heard this was Esau's plan, she urged Jacob to run, encouraged him to go to Laban in her homeland faraway.

Which he did.

Leaving Beer-Sheba to head into the wilderness.

He was essentially back-tracking the journey Abraham had taken two generations earlier—Ur to Haran to Shechem to Bethel. Abraham had been the first to be called. Out of his homeland, away from his people, he was called away from Ur. More to the point, he was the first in scripture to be of concern as simply a person. A man, and a woman, and their household: of focused concern.

This is quite a change from the several chapters that precede Abraham. Big stories of giants and towers built to touch the heavens, a flood and an ark so mighty it could hold two of every creature, indeed the creation of the earth and the creation of all the earth's creatures: these would suddenly fall away to a human-scale set of concerns, little household dramas of squabbling wives and squabbling children.

As it happens, it was also quite a departure from other ancient literature, concerned as these are with gods and monsters, heroes and beauties, not mere men who have little of distinction about them, a man with little to brag about other than that he can walk and he can listen. "Be still and know..."

Called out. Called to leave Ur, a great city at the heart of a great civilization. Called to leave the gods of the place and their practices to keep those gods happy and loyal. Called out to where there was...what?

Abraham and Sarah and Lot and their household would travel along the river.

Then they would depart from the river.

Come to Haran.

Come to Shechem.

Come to Bethel.

And every time in every place, God was there.

Renewing the promise: "I will make of you a great nation. Your offspring will number more than the stars in the sky." Abraham would listen, would be still and know. A promise that suggested a deeper astonishing truth: that, as we say in Godly Play, God was not just here or there, but all of God was everywhere. This God of Abraham, he wasn't in this rock or that river, in this copse or that coral. This God of Abraham: this God was everywhere. Everywhere the same. Everywhere the same quiet, persistent presence and truth. Willing life. Encouraging life. Even, perhaps especially, human life. Even human life, which can get tangled up in itself, snarled in pettiness or snagged on betrayal or scandalized by violence, the gall of one another!

People: what are we that God is mindful of us, amiright?

Two generations later, Jacob would back-track and would make the same discovery his grandfather had made. And, boy, did he bust his buttons with pride. No one had ever noticed this thing that not a century earlier had been discovered (and maybe not even by Abraham alone, just by Abraham so to be written down and remembered.). "Surely the Lord is in this place," Jacob said, pleased as punch, "-and I didn't know!"

One day, Tobias came home from school. Fresh off the school bus where he would always acquire all sorts of exciting information, "School bus science" we called some of his assertions, he asked me, "Mom, do you know Mandarin?"

"M-mandarin?" I asked, a little miffed that I'd have to admit this as ignorance while I was probably knee-deep in cookie dough and Bible commentaries. "No," I looked down at him. "I don't know Mandarin."

"Oh, it's this fake butter they had in the olden days."

Margarine: it seems the only thing Jacob didn't know was how little he knew.

You've got to wonder if the story itself wasn't having some fun with him. Marilynne Robinson, in her book which I can't stop referring to, *Reading Genesis*, wonders something similar. After all, the story itself mentions "place" quite a lot. Six times the word is used, twice by Jacob himself, four times by the narrative voice, a drumbeat to alert us to the specificity of this place.

This, though the great reveal of these earliest books of the Bible is the pervasiveness of God, the faithfulness of God, present no matter where the people might find themselves, whether Ur or Canaan or eventually Egypt or even the middle of the albeit narrow Red Sea. This story, then, seems to point to the irony of Jacob discovering an old idea that Abraham had rightly departed from, the old, obsolete, incorrect idea that God is more here than there.

Six times, though, the word "place" features, calling our attention to what Jacob is attending to, that God is here, in this place, calling our attention to what we already know as readers, devoted readers: that God is here, in this place. But Jacob's emphasis on this, the story itself seems to suggest, indicates Jacob as more surprised than he ought to have been, if he'd only listened to his grandfather, which is more surprised than we ought to be if we are to learn the lesson of that apparent truth, that there is one God for all the earth, and that this God is faithfully devoted to all the earth and all of the earth, the rocks and trees, the bears and bees, each part and particle of this dynamic, painful, sin-snarled, love-redeemed world.

Every place: God's favorite place, blessed by God's loving, favoring presence and countenance.

It's strange to think that the equality of all people is a contested notion. This assertion in the Declaration, which the writers thought well to claim as self-evident, that all men are created equal: it's funny to think this might not be self-evident, might even be an arguable point. But so it is today.

Of course, there's tragic irony in these same Colonial writers being slavers as well, eventually to establish that the enslaved are each but $\frac{3}{4}$ of a person. It's slightly less tragic, arguably but a matter of grammar, that the men declared as equal would well have

included, in their minds, women, and perhaps eventually children: that all people are created equal.

Irony aside, they framed this as self-evident to establish their “first thing,” their *a priori* knowledge, that founding assertion that all other knowledge and argument is founded on but which itself can’t be argued because it functions as fundamental. And this isn’t a dodge. This isn’t a “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain” moment. All knowledge sits on a foundation of the *a priori*, the thing that must simply be accepted as true. In order to have any further thought, in order to have any further conversation, there are founding principles that must be accepted as true.

Here are some that I would assert as true though not provably so and not easily argued for either: life is good, facts are real and do not bend to human attempts at dominance, love is the founding force of all things and the thing to which all things shall return.

The writers of the Declaration didn’t have time to argue the truth of their *a priori* assertion, so they cast it as self-evident—and I think not wrongly so, that all people are created equal.

But this is an assertion that has become newly (if again) contested. The fascist flank of the right wing would claim that not all people are created equal, that some shouldn’t function from a place of equality in our civic life, and indeed that the founding document of the country isn’t the Declaration but is the Constitution. Elon Musk, Pete Hegseth and his “pastor” Doug Wilson come to mind, racists, misogynists. The hard-left flank of all possible bodies politic misunderstands the assertion of created equal to mean functioning the same, that there should be no inequality at work in a body politic, that there should indeed be a management of function and outcome that makes everyone the same.

But to be created equal is not about uniformity and the centralized management it requires; it’s about value. This, as I’ve always understood, for as long as I’ve bothered to try to understand it, is about value. All people are created equal, all people have equal value in their Creator’s estimation, and all policy-making must therefore flow from the understanding that we are all equal in value in the sight of the final Judge of all things. If you have Down syndrome, if you’re old and feeble, if you’re young and strong, if you’re a literary genius or balletic on the baseball field, if you’re in the pulpit or in the pew or

standing by the janitor's closet getting ready to vacuum the crumbs of coffee hour: you're equal in value in the esteem of the One who made us all.

This assertion is a close secondary assertion from the realization that all of God is everywhere, that every place is God's favored place, that every creature is God's besottedly beloved creature which is itself a hard one to hold as true in practice. Time and again, people have had experiences in places that lead them to assert that "here" above all other places is a place close to God, here indeed is *the* place closest to God.

Granted, Christianity has a head start in living into this truth. Christianity, after all, is uncommonly insistent not to have a holy place. Our Lord and Savior was itinerant. He was born in a stable (so says Luke)—or was it a house (so says Matthew)? He was buried in a borrowed tomb—but he didn't stay there for long. He established a church but only according to Matthew, and the Greek word to speak of it, *ekklesia*, means not a building in a place but rather "gathering" or "assembly," which is to say wherever two or more are gathered.

And, yes, important things happened in particular places. But they're too numerous to be much help—Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, Golgatha, a road to Emmaus, a road to Damascus. And then Paul went out and made a Biblical name for such places as Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Galatia, Thessalonica. All of which is to say there is with Christianity an uncommon insistence that faithfulness is a restless, placeless practice—except insofar as any place where two or more gather in his name or the place of each of our hearts.

Even still, Christians went off and made cruel war to reclaim certain lands from certain "barbarians" over the long course of several centuries. Similarly, there are chauvinistic urges about church sanctuaries as opposed to out there in the fallen world—which is to say that Jacob's discovery is one we need to make over and over again. He wasn't uniquely ignorant and then proudly enlightened. He was rather as any of us are when we discover once again that, though we might gather and even live in a great and godly place, it's not the greatest or the godliest place—nor does it need to be.

See, we shouldn't think too highly of Jacob. He was, given a certain reading of this bare-bones story, a proud young fool who is (spoiler alert) about to meet his match in Laban, indeed about to be played as a fool (and doesn't he have that coming?) But we also

shouldn't think too lowly of him, because he's not unlike any of us might be or might have been.

He's just a person. Though one who was instrumental to God's good purpose in God's beloved world, like any of us might be, or indeed like any of us is, he's just a person. Which is enough to grant him entry into the grand story of God-with-us, more than enough to put him at the center of our attention when we want to know what God is like. God is faithful. Humans are fickle: God is faithful. People are often foolish; God is faithful. People can be calculating, as Jacob indeed was, saying if God remains true to God's promises, then (and only then) Jacob will be true to God; God, irrespective of calculation not nearly as clever as supposed, is faithful. People can be mean, vengeful, overweening in our pride, setting ourselves for quite the fall; God is faithful.

And God is everywhere so.

As we head into a future that is dark with unknowns, as the future always is, as we suffer a small pantheon of people whose wealth and power put them beyond politics, frees them up to act as careless monsters, which they shamelessly do, God is faithful. What's good will reveal itself and it will appeal. We can trust.

Thanks be to God.