

A Sanctuary without Walls

July 17, 2011

Romans 8:12-25

8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh

8:13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

8:15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

8:16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

8:17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

8:19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;

8:20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

8:21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;

8:23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

8:24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

8:25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Genesis 28:10-22

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 ladder 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.'

Proclamation of the Word

It was a muggy August Saturday morning, the day the Summer Staff left Montreat Conference Center to return home and back to college. Even though we fell asleep late the night before, my roommate Julie and I planned to hike Lookout Mountain to watch the sunrise. It would be our final hurrah to mark the end of a great summer full of clubbies (kids who attended the summer day camp called Clubs) and Confer-geeks (the thousands of youth who flood the valley each summer for Youth Conference). Julie and I were friends from the start. She greeted me at the Staff lodge, helped me with luggage, and asked if I wanted to room together. We stayed up until 3:00am talking, friends from the start. We had grown that summer. We sang in the choir together for Sunday worship, we met friends, shared Ramen noodle dinners, and worked hard to serve in a great place where ministry happens. We wanted to thank God and mark the end of our summer, by hiking Lookout, watching the sunrise, maybe sing a little. It would be our thank offering.

But for any of you who have made the hike up lookout, you soon would see that you are not the first. Trail keepers have marked the trails. Sometimes mini altars of rocks or a dropped shoe is there as a sign of all who have gone before. It is a popular pilgrimage because when you reach the top, you can see the whole Swananoa Valley all the way to Asheville. When you get to the top and stand on the rock, you know you have touched heaven and that God is present in a way that we cannot see in the valley below. It is holy ground because so many pilgrims have been there too, touched by the grace of God. It is holy ground because we have photos of that place from different points in life: college friends, summer friends, and PSA friends from Clemson. We have photos of our children at different ages on that rock: backpack age, toddler age, and finally hiking it on their own. I have pictures of my youth groups and kids I worked with serving with a Youth Conference. Lookout is a place where God is surely present. It is a place of blessing, peace, perspective for many. For so many of us, it is a sanctuary without walls.

Often in a place like this, I will pick up a stone to mark this place, this significant moment. You may have places that have become sanctuaries, a place where God is clearly present. It may be a place in creation like a special spot by the lake or the rock at Camp Buc. You may have memories of going to church with your parents or grandparents, sitting in the pew with the smell of Dad's after shave, Grandma's Sunday perfume, or the taste of apple juice and Nilla wafers on your tongue- communion, nursery-style. God may have met you in a hospital room, over lunch with a friend, or as you sift through your mother's cedar chest, your father's tool box. God will show up at an unexpected moment, touch us with grace, and leave us changed forever.

Jacob is a man on the run from his brother whom he has wronged. Esau, his brother, is ready to kill him. Jacob belongs to the promise to his Grandfather Abraham, but he sure has not acted out of faith in God. He seems to only be motivated by self-serving greed as he tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright and fools his father into blessing him. Having left Beersheba to go to the land of his Mother's family, he meets Yahweh God along the way. By the way, Jacob was going to meet a wife, not looking for the Lord. God seems to show up when we least expect it.

Jacob was not on a search for God, but God was searching for Jacob.

Maybe that is why God sneaks up on Jacob in his sleep. When we are sleeping, we are not in charge. We are vulnerable. Jacob who has been grabbing at birthrights and blessings, cannot grab or take anything in his sleep. He is wholly surrendered. Maybe that is why we teach children to pray at bedtime, "Now I lay me

down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Keep me safely through the night. Wake me with the morning light." Now that's surrender. We are letting go, entrusting ourselves into God's hands. When we sleep, we recognize that God will continue to rule the universe even without our help for a little while! It is precisely at this point that God's messengers arrive in a dream. Jacob's waking hours were full of fear, terror, loneliness, and we can presume guilt. But in a dream God presents Jacob with a new future. It is in our surrender, our vulnerability even, that God can meet us.

The Lord God would make a great nation of Jacob and his descendants. That nation would be a blessing to all peoples according to the promise to Abraham. Jacob is an important instrument of God's blessing even if he does act more like a selfish adolescent. Jacob's dream and worship at Bethel, the House of God, would be his mountaintop experience. He is being transformed into a man after God's purposes. And Jacob finally wakes up and smells the coffee. He is now aware of God's presence in his life and in this place.

When Jacob wakes up from his dream, he sees the same things: same rocks, same sand, same backpack but he has new eyes. Marcel Proust was right, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

Jacob has seen the angels ascending and descending to heaven on a ramp. He has heard God's voice saying I am with you, I will keep you, and I will not leave you until I have done what I promised to do.

Did you hear the three parts of the promise to Jacob?

I am with you.

I will keep you.

I will not leave you until I have done what I promised to do.

The Lord God promises his presence, his protection, and a home with God as a sure companion. When it comes to this promise we can hear the refrain in Scripture particularly with Psalm 23.

I am with you/PRESENCE

I will not fear for you are with me

I will keep you/PROTECTION

Your rod and your staff they comfort me. He makes me lie down.

He leads me, God restores me for his name's sake, prepares a table in the presence of my enemies

I will not leave you/make my HOME with you

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

God breaks into our terror, loneliness, and broken relationships and pronounces promise. Jacob replies, "Surely the LORD is in this place- and I did not know it." This place is awesome! This must be God's house and the threshold of heaven."

You may be living between a rock and a hard place. You may be in a house full of fear, of pain, of indecision, and you want to be in the house, full of the presence, of God, a place called Bethel. You may be living at the gate of changes, the gate of struggle, the gate of self-centeredness. And God can make it a Gate of Heaven. God can take an ordinary place along your journey and transform it into a place of promise and grace most especially when you are not looking for God.

A dream in the middle of nowhere makes all the difference for Jacob, but most importantly for the generations that follow in the blessing. God uses the ordinary stone, a penny, a child, a mustard seed, bread and wine and makes something extraordinary. This is how the grace of God works. This is the God whom we worship and serve. God takes a no place in the middle of nowhere and makes it some place. God takes a no body and makes a some body.

This trickster who has deceived his father and brother, and who since birth has lived in strife with the people around him is transformed by God into a richly blessed man who serves as a source of God's blessing to others. If God can change Jacob, God can change us.

To commemorate Jacob takes a stone pillow and anoints it to make a place of worship, a sanctuary without walls. Just as God promises and acts, Jacob trusts and responds to God's grace. He professes his faith, worships God, and then takes concrete action. He pledges a tithe, 1/10 of all he has, for God's purposes. Jacob had spent his life grabbing and trying to climb the ladder of success on his own. He has been searching and striving for the life he wanted, but he is met by the God in whose hands his future is held. He cannot continue to take, to grab, and to make a life of his own will. He must receive the life God has created for him as a gift. Look at the picture on the front of the bulletin again. In Jacob's dream only God is at the top of the ladder. The angels are the ones moving up and down. Jacob remains on earth to live the life God created for him. He just has to decide to trust in the dream and vision that God is offering by God's grace. He must follow God, the God who is with him and will lead him forward.

This is a hard word for those of us who are strivers- working hard to achieve our dreams and making it all happen. But if the dream includes only our vision, we will constantly be consumed by discontent. The grace of God is a gift to receive. Like Mama said, when you receive a gift all you have to do is say thank you. Like Jacob the way we say thanks is to say I trust you, O God. I commit to your Kingdom and your purposes for my life. I will give you my resources, a tenth, and my life to you.

God has already chosen to bless you.

Now the choice is yours.

Will you accept the promise, protection, and peace that is your inheritance, O, child of God?

Laura Smith Conrad
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Benediction

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.~ Numbers 6:24-26