

“Stone Beds and Strange Comforts”
 Sermon for 12 January 2020
 Texts: Gen. 28:10-22

We are prone to assay things by our senses and by their appearances. This is an almost entirely materialistic manner of assessment. We see the yellow of the banana, we may see and feel its shape and whiff of its distinctive aroma. All of this remains in the domain of our senses and the realm of appearances. However, once we have peeled the banana and consumed it that is when we have realized the essence of “banana.” For the essence of the banana is this: that it is a wholesome fruit designed for our consumption. It is food for us alongside others. Fuel for the physical body which, digested, lends energy to that body. Surely there is more to a banana than meets the eye, more than what stimulates the tastebuds and more than satisfies our appetite. So what is there about this world in which banana’s exist for food for us—where hunger and thirst are designed into the mix and we, who consume food to live, are provided for in such a marvelous and astonishing way?

Some might suggest that that we can argue from the existence of food, from food chains and vegetative cycles, to a natural theology supporting the existence of God—a farm to table kind of theology. Nature, or the natural order is taken to be a second testament (book of revelation) to the reality, and the existence of God. But that doesn’t necessarily work out so well. As long as we stick to the level of our senses, and appearances, it is simply not possible to get to the God of heaven—the materialist ladder can’t reach that tall. The heart of God, if there is a heart to God, and that is certainly the hope of many believers, the heart of God is what the bible reveals to us. Apart from the revelation of God’s heart, indeed of his entire being, we are clueless as to why there are banana’s —indeed, clueless as to why we even are. To be crystal clear, I am putting out there that if we do not move beyond our senses and the appearance of things—the materialistic approach which drives naturalistic scientism—we cannot know God at all. It is possible to say that apart from God’s self-disclosure of himself we would neither know him, nor know that we were created to be known by him.

Some people read Gen. 28 and assume that Jacob was very spiritually immature—a young and callow fellow. He was not “young” unless you count seventy-six (perhaps as old as eighty!) as young. And, we read, ***it was time for him to get married!—go and take a wife from one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother.*** (28:2) Only if we adopt a “biblical mindset” are we able to accurately process the significance of Jacob’s age here. Our seventy-six is post-retirement, Jacob’s seventy-six was more a middle-aged, mature man than a youth, or a retiree. His brother Esau has been married some thirty-six years when the theft of the blessing transpires. This allows plenty of time for Esau’s Hittite wives to truly aggravate Isaac and Rebekah as well as to establish the twin’s diverse characters. By this latter I mean Esau had years to demonstrate he was as unworthy of the blessing he lost as Jacob was to acquire it; but that is not to say, Jacob was solidly mature at seventy-six—the next twenty years of his life, serving his rascally uncle Laban, would solidify that maturation. It is very interesting that the relatively early marriage of Esau disallows the observation that the twins were both late-bloomers.

So, caution about imposing our twenty-first century norms, or categories of aging on the patriarchal age is advisable.

Jacob, under the threat of lethal harm from Esau, is sent into exile so as *to allow Esau's rage to subside*. First there was the birthright and now the blessing of the firstborn were both acquired by Jacob, *the grasper*. It is worthy of note that Jacobs exit from the Promised and Land under the pretext of procuring a wife, and his re-entry decades later (at age 96 with wives, children and great flocks!) are both marked by incidents of grappling, of seizing and taking. He also held a well-earned reputation for cunning, or deception. This changes when he is renamed "Israel;" It is a combination of two Hebrew words (ישראל and ל-א) and it means "will/can struggle/rule with God", in recognition of Jacob's ability *to hold his own* with an angel of God. (Gen. 32:22ff) It seems significant that Jacob is always in flight, it seems, from his brother, then from his uncle. His nomadic life had a fugitive strain to it.

Taking one of the stones of the place, he put i under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. We note that this takes place in **a certain place** the Hebrew drawing our attention to the specialness of that place before anything has transpired there! One doesn't just stumble onto a sacred, or holy place! **And he dreamed.** Here are two means of divine communication angels and dreams compounded in this account. As Jacob is alone, we have no other human source for this dream vision **He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth—an immensely tall ladder, it appears—for the top of it reached to heaven.** (v.12) I take it that this is the first dream sequence with imagery. This ladder stands for a bridge between two worlds and between two realities; between earth and heaven, and also between Jacob prior to his encounter with God, and the Jacob who leaves this place altered by that divine encounter. Early commentators allowed as how this ladder, the mediating symbol between earth and heaven prefigures the incarnation of Jesus, the Christ; or, the Son of God made flesh. A less dramatic interpretation takes this ladder as a symbol of "the high road" to heaven, the way of commerce and conversation between God and creatures here on earth. Angels would descend the ladder with messages from God and others would ascend the same ladder with prayers and petitions to God made by suppliants here below. I must confess that I pictured this "ladder" as a giant escalator such as one finds in Filene's Basement, Boston, or an uptown store like Neiman Marcus of Dallas, at the Houston Galleria, with 42 locations nationwide. It's wonderful how we populate bible stories from childhood experiences. Jacob's ladder would have been of a more primitive and rustic nature. I'm sure; a stairway, perhaps, to permit the ascending and descending of the angels. A pole ladder, or a lattice ladder would not do.

Isaac may possibly have seen an angel, the one who conversed with Abraham on Mt. Moriah, who stayed Abraham from slaying Isaac. He more certainly may have heard the angel speak with his father twice, at that momentous occasion. Once to prevent the slaying, and the second to reiterate the promise of a multitude of descendants. In Gen. 26 Isaac has a theophany when God forbade him to go down to Egypt (see vv.2-5) But Isaac's spiritual life seems relatively tame compared to that of Abraham and that of Jacob. Angels conversed with his father and his son, but not directly with him according to the record.

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac, said the Lord, **who stood over the ladder**, teeming with angels. **The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring will be like the dust of the earth.** (Cm Gen. 13:16 **lie dust they cannot be counted**; see also Num. 23:10, the oracle of Balaam: **Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number a fourth part of Israel?** In fulfillment of this divine promise to the patriarchs.) And, echoing the promise made to Abraham: **And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.** This reiteration of the divine promises is a matter of making it Jacob's own, not simply a matter of dumb repetition, as the patriarch were unable to hear it. It makes a significant difference if a promise made to someone else is repeated to you, as contrasted with having the promise expressed to you personally. ***This is God's promise to Jacob and by extending this promise God makes himself Jacob's God just as surely as he was the God of his forbearers.*** This translates into an assurance for Jacob. . . a faith to trust in, a confidence to build on. Surely that is the import of: **I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.** (v.15) **For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.**

Now if, out of close association with heathen peoples, Jacob had absorbed the notion that all gods were local deities, this dream/vision takes a wrecking ball to that error. God is omnipresent. The God of heaven is the only true God everywhere, and anywhere. This may have been news to Jacob, but it is revelation to us. When it is written that scripture was written for our instruction, this is a prime example. Jacob's dream has theological significance and relevance for us.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." (v.16) And he was filled with dread. **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."** This is not mere hyperbole, friends. There is a corollary to this omnipresence and it has to do with God's presence in the eventfulness of life. God is present everywhere and he is involved in everything. Our struggles can sometimes be traced to our obliviousness, to our forgetfulness. We imagine that we are alone. An isolated consciousness, but we are not. There is a web of beings all around us, created beings surround us. They people, as it were, the stairway to heaven. We only imagine that we have been abandoned, we have not. Existential angst is delusional. We think that angels are imaginary, but they are just as real as we are—just as real as rocks, and wind and rain, only different. In fact, angels belong to the realm of the *really* real, the everlastingly and eternally real—they are always guiding, protecting, leading . . . and all of that in addition to worshipping and glorifying God for Whose pleasure they were created. And because such beings consort here, because such orders of existence intersect here that is why with Jacob, if we acknowledge what is going on, we agree, "How very, very awesome this place is , , , the Lord is in this place and I never knew it!

Everything matters a whole lot more than we can even imagine. No place is nowhere. That we inhabit and inhabited creation is stunningly awesome. When we are in touch with that awareness, worship comes easily, naturally. Worship is native to creation. Our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Now that is the main lesson that Jacob should have gleaned from his dream on a pillar of stone. But he didn't learn it either thoroughly, or completely. He would disgrace himself, he

would disenchant himself. But there's hope is this: he took the stone he had dreamed upon **and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.** (v.18) God knows how he had had the foresight to pack some anointing oil. Maybe it was stock in trade for a well-equipped traveler. But he had oil to bless with and so he anointed the pillar and he gave that awesome place in his journey the awesome name of **Bethel** which means "**house of God.**" **However, he did not build an altar.** This reinforces my earlier point of not learning thoroughly what he was to learn about the Lord; he was not willing to entirely submit to the Lord of his salvation.

He did, additionally, make a vow. Again, signifying how close he was! So near and yet so far. The vow embodies a bargaining attitude—Jacob would barter with God!

If God will be with me (he already said he would!) **and will keep me in the way that I go** (Not exactly, God's way, not the way that the Lord would have me go—it will be a difficult, painful journey because of this willfulness! His God-excluding self-determination which, among other things drew him into fourteen years of servitude and a bigamous marriage! A heartbreakingly difficult, sexually dysfunction and violent family history!) **and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear** (God had declared that he would keep him already, too!) **so that I come again to my father's house.** There are significant traces of the "Prodigal Son" embedded in this bargain—hopefully you see the implicit disdain of father and home, and the censorious presence of the "elder" brother! The living of life on his terms before coming to the end of his entertainments and devices—doing life his way in a far country! My point is that Jacob's story is not a new story—but it does appear to be the first run of a very old, familiar story. One that Jesus told as vital to apprehending the father's love for lost, repentant sinners! **THEN THE LORD SHALL BE MY GOD** I must do due diligence and point out the presumptuousness of Jacob's spelling out terms to God **as if the Lord had not spoken those terms into existence already!!** But Jacob is not done yet! **and this stone, which i have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.** Jacob has no idea. God does not live in a house made with human hands as if he were so two-bit household deity . . . the kind anyone can purchase at the local Walmart! Friends, make no mistake, Jacob will come back with inferior household gods *and he will end of burying them unde the oaks where pagans used to frequent their gods.* Jacob is offering to build God a temple . . . early on. We will have to keep an eye on that condition and see how it turns out. **And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.** It's intriguing that the tithe makes its appearance here, but Jacob is such a schemer that he has to reassure God that his tithe will be a full one! So the passage ends on a positive note of sober self-awareness. Jacob knows where some of the problems may lie and that is a good thing. Clearly he is waking up, even if he is not fully "woke" yet.