

“I Am Not a Religious Person”
 Sermon for 19 January 2020
 Texts: Genesis 28:10-22

I wonder what goes through your mind when you hear these words? Here's what goes through mine—it is a little like the touch screen mind castle of Sherlock Holmes! I think: carnal . . . sensual . . . possibly skeptical . . . probably selfish, certainly sinful . . . intellectually proud . . . rigid . . . ignorant . . . possibly abused . . . traumatized? . . . /immature . . . unconscious . . . lacking in self-awareness . . . defensive . . . miseducated and out of touch. I sift through this rolodex of symptoms, mental qualities and hypotheses looking for an opening to conversation. And, frankly, I work hard as listening so as to quickly narrow the field because the nonreligious are typically impatient with religious types like me. It is a little like meeting a guest at the airport and trying to figure out what to talk about by way of getting acquainted.

So I begin this way today because my read of Jacob as he is introduced to us in Genesis 28 is that even at seventy-six he is basically a non-religious person. Just appearing on the pages of Scripture is no guarantee that we are dealing with a religious person. There are several personages that I would describe as basically secular persons, culturally non-religious. There is Pilate, Felix and Festus for example. (Acts 24-25) The retort, **Am I a Jew?** (John 18:35) by Pilate can be approached as if uttered by a nonreligious person. Pagans, Heathens and adherents of other faiths are not to be counted as “nonreligious,” their faith is in other gods.

Jacob up to this point in his life, in the biblical narrative is evidently not a very religious man. Do you agree that there seem to be a lot of Jacobs in this world of ours? I can hardly count the number of times some stranger has intoned to me, “Well, I’m just not a religious person.” Jacob’s world was the world of a pastoralist, a sheep-herder—an earthy, hands on a practical world of animal husbandry. Most shepherds are hardly poets, or philosophers—David and Moses would be exceptions!—despite that depiction in romantic literature and art. And Jacob also excelled at cooking but that also tends toward the practical. So it helps to picture Jacob as settled, practical and not particularly religious as he sets off to the East ostensibly in quest of a wife.

Very often the next declaration of a non-religious person is “No, I am a man of science.” So they may claim to believe in science, but not in the God who instituted science. I have, sometimes, responded, “Tell me, what do you mean by ‘a man of sincere?’” Are you a professional scientist, a researcher? What are your scientific credentials?

Typically they don’t have any. Therefore “a man of science” must means something else! Maybe what they mean is that they can’t take anything on faith (but in actuality they do!), that they can’t believe in someone they can’t see. They claim to rely on sensory data, on empirical evidence. Seeing is believing. Well, that seldom survives the test of more questioning. And it wasn’t true for Jacob—with him neither seeing or hearing would suffice to secure his faith in God. Jacob doesn’t say he doubts his experience because it came to him in a dream. Indeed, he acts, the following morning, on what has been revealed to him in the dream (puts up a pillar, anoints it with oil, names the place “the house of God”) as if he took it to be real, true, authentic. In a

stunning display of quasi-unbelief, Jacob makes his belief in God *contingent* upon many of the very things that God has already promised him. That is why I used the word quasi-unbelief. He even elaborates his demands! **If God will be with me** (promise #4) **and will keep me** (promise #5—he adds, **give me bread and raiment**), **and I come again to my father's house in peace** (promise #6 with **my father's house** and **in peace** as an extra condition!), then, says Jacob, **the Lord shall be my God**. (Gen. 28:19-20)

In other words: If God performs like my pet seal, then I will acknowledge him to be **my God**. I dread to think how God will respond to being considered one's pet seal! How do you think that will go? Will that qualify as real faith? And why should I be concerned about anyone else's quality, or genuineness of faith? Because we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! The content of the faith matters supremely, more than the fervency, or magnitude of feeling.

It is difficult to suggest any particular pathway with the “non-religious” person as the right, or most effective way to witness to him. Truly, However, the necessity of doing so, or of attempting to do so lies with this consideration: Jesus says, **This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent**. (John 17:3) This compelling, positive declaration is very helpful.

As we would want the “non-religious” person to attain **eternal life**, we must exert ourselves to pull off either an intervention, or to attempt an introduction to God. Here's the urgent cause: if eternal life is knowing God, knowing Jesus Christ, then what is ignorance about God, or ignorance about Jesus Christ? **It is eternal death**. Eternal death is the nicest way to say, that ignorance of God, and of His Christ results in *damnation*. Unbelievers, nonreligious persons do not simply float on by on their way of happy oblivion! No one is out there forever; there is a consequence to ignorance, especially, *willful ignorance*—as in choosing unbelief: “I am not a religious person” is a choice to not believe and a prescription for inevitable consignment to hell. We have both compelling cause and urgent reason to engage with every non-religious person that we can.

That settled, let's pick up with Jacob heading east from Beersheba. Ostensibly he headed east to find himself a wife from the stock of his mother's family, to Laban His mother's brother. I say ostensibly because Jacob was actually fleeing from his brother's wrath. Esau, outraged that Jacob had duped his father Isaac into giving Jacob the father's blessing for the first born. Now Jacob travels until the sun sets and he has arrived at **a certain place**—it wasn't a random place, a chance place, or even a convenient place. It was a certain place, a special and appointed place. It was a place of revelation. However, Jacob had no idea, when travel weary, he lay down *there* to sleep. But he was readied for his unanticipated divine appointment. He dreamed a dream, a divine dream, **behold**, a dream which entailed a heavenly vision. In the dream he saw a flight of stairs, **set up on the earth** and the top of this stairway **reached to heaven**. What a spectacular sight! This enormous, immensely tall stairway, bridging heaven and earth—connecting where he lay to heaven itself. Then, on the stairs, **ascending up and descending down** were the **angels of God**. These servants of the most high God, God's messengers, appeared almost like streams of

light. *Heavenly beings* luminous beings, creature of another order, a higher realm¹ lent their light into the night sky of Jacob's dream. It is possible that they were singing God's praises as they went about their work because their primary purpose, besides serving God's people, is that of glorifying God. Their music may have sounded like a mighty rushing river, perhaps a roaring like the ocean, or thunder, or the cataracts of the deep. We aren't told about other sound effects of the vision because the vision focuses mostly on the seen, on visible representation. **And behold, the Lord stood above it.** By this we are to understand that ***the Lord God himself appeared***, standing above, or over this staircase to heaven. He was standing in heaven and this apparition, this busy, lit staircase was under his feet. The distance was immense, between earth and heaven, and the Lord was even more immense. See Isaiah 6:1-4:

**In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said,
"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts,
The whole earth is full of His glory."
4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the [house] temple was filling with smoke.**

I think we may assume that Jacob had never seen anything this *ginormous* before. God was bigger than anything he had ever imagined. And what falls out of this observation is the fact that Jacob had probably never even imagined God before and now he was looking at God's dream manifestation—it's stunning. There is no record of any divine encounter in Jacob's life prior to this dream premier². And then we read ***to hear*** the very words of God extending His covenant to Jacob:

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your [seed] descendants. 14 Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will [break through] spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 Behold, 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 [spoken to] promised you."

This is Jacob's birthday! Spiritually speaking, this is the moment he is birthed.

¹ We are not told where the angels typically dwell. If they dwell in heaven, they are able to frequent the earth. Perhaps there is no heaven nor earth to them and they dwell everywhere in realms invisible—a hidden existence, most likely, everywhere.

² Consider that as we sleep and dream, our rivers still flow, things still float out to sea . . . tides ebb and flow, the oceans sing and the winds set clouds to dancing. The natural stars still shine regardless of what the dream stars do! And the great stream of being flows over and around us as if we were mere pebbles, or stones in the river bed. We are a dust in the greater wind of time. It is marvelous! And so the Psalmist cries **What is man that Thou are mindful of him?** Psalm 8:4-6.

Let's reflect together on this "birth" because it occurs when we are converted to God, when we are born again. When we believe we "come to term" as a creature "carried in "the womb of God's eternal purpose." We have not been gestating in there from conception! No, long before that you were conceived in the mind, plan and purpose of God **before the foundations of the earth**. We are as "the birth of His counsel" for God has conceived and "chosen us in Christ" in eternity past. We enter into time although we preceded time. And here is what we are:

- We are the "object of His choicest love." God loves us with the same love with which He loved the Son. That is incomparable love.
- We are the "purchase of His Son's blood." Redeemed at a price, purchased at great cost, therefore we know that what God gained at so great a price, He will stop at nothing to keep, to retain, protect, secure and seal forever.
- We are His by the everlasting covenant. And as partakers of His everlasting covenant we acquire the foreverness of God in the bargain.

God promises Jacob 1. the land, 2. to a numerous posterity—like **the dust of the earth**, 3. that all families of all nations will be blessed through his progeny, 4. his presence (**I will be with you**), 5. his provision (**I will keep you**), 6. a promise of a return (**back to this land**), and 7. I will not forsake you until I have **fulfilled all I have spoken**.) Now that is a pile of promises. You would think that Jacob would have received this with joy but there is no such response. There's dread. There the conviction that God is somehow present in this place but that conviction doesn't issue in justifying faith—at least not right then. How come? ***Here's how come. Jacob up to this point in his life is not a very religious man.***

He is the seed of promise, and the root of the nation of Israel, the source, or fountain from which will flow the church—first as the "called-out-ones" of the Old Testament (the *ekklesia*) and, subsequently, the body of Christ in the New Testament. The church is the assembly, or congregation of the saints and every member of the body of Christ is, by definition, a religious person. I mean someone touched by God, born of God, chosen and called and anointed of the Spirit—yes, spiritually born again.

These terms do not describe Jacob as introduced in Genesis 28. And what must transpire is clear: he must be moved from "not being a religious person" to being a religious person. He must go from being related to Abraham solely by physical descent (biologically, from his genes, as it were) to a position of spiritual relationship. The God of his father Abraham and his father Isaac must somehow become his God—no one inherits salvation. Being raised in a believing home is wonderful, a matter of great advantage, however, it is no guarantee of salvation. If Jesus does not save you, you simply are not saved, It is all about what he has done by grace, and what you have received by faith. Jacob did not have faith in the God of Abraham, or of Isaac. He was, as we say, "lost." All those who are nonreligious, are "lost"—"lost" that is unless God calls them, unless the Father gives them to the Son.

"This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For it is My Father's will that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:39-40)

What has God revealed to Jacob? First, that God is present, near at hand. God is engaged in our reality even when we are oblivious to his! Second, the reality we are in is neither empty, or lonely. There is so much activity going on, **angels ascending and descending**—*serving God's creatures and glorifying God all the while*. Angels guard us, guide us, inform and protect us—all the time, not just in urgent moments and in our crises. Thirdly, that the personal permeates the universe; creation is not cold, dead, indifferent—or, worse, malignant, hostile and hateful. Fourthly, that God is everywhere and over all—powerful, sovereign and supreme.

There are implications which flow from these revelations: the vision was meant to teach Jacob about the high aims of creation, the noble purposes of God for man, the divine ends for human history in view. Jacob didn't appear to get that. The vision was meant to convey that nothing is trivial, wearisome, or monotonous. Not in an order where God is present, engaged, observing and working through it all—The swift ascent of our aspirations the equally swift descent of his daily blessing—great, and little, regular and exceptional. A secret of purity also resides in this vision. Who would dare indulge in craftiness, cunning, deceit and treachery if the consciousness of God's surveillance were real to them? Those who sin operate as if God doesn't see. But what if God were as all observant as this vision suggests He is? What if the interior monitor of our conscience is directly wired to this good, observant and moral God? Who says to us as he said to Abraham: **Walk before men and be perfect**. God expects us to be righteous with the righteousness of Christ! Does that not kill the motions of sin and quicken the heart to service?

Add to nobility of purpose, the secret of purity, one further dimension: the secret of peace. Hopes and fears and uncertainties all appear differently from the vantage point of divine presence. If one has faith in God as the God of providence he presents himself to be, in nature, in history, in the biographies of our lives—his fingerprints are all over us. This knowledge should calm us, charm our insecurity, tame the surge of anxiety by steadying our hearts. But Jacob doesn't seem to get that either. His reception of these disclosures is imperfect.

That could be discouraging except when we realize that we are just like Jacob. Our practice of the presence of God is just as uncertain, unsettled and imperfect as his. That means God has work to do with us. What Jacob's life demonstrates is actually wonderful: we have this need for work and God, out of his kindness and mercy, attends to it. **He is able to complete the work that he has begun in us**—those words are of great consolation to us as we struggle through from where God meets us to where God wishes to bring us. But, but God is the God who brings us through.

Amen.