

Eric Dupee
July 19, 2020
Candidate Sermon
Genesis 28:10-22
“On A Rock in A Hard Place”

When I was growing up, I was required to go to church every Sunday. My dad was the minister. I had no choice. Sunday morning sports were not an option for me. I tried to get out of going, but it never worked.

I could fake an upset stomach or a headache all I wanted, but unless a thermometer registered a fever, the response was always the same. “Get back upstairs. Put some church clothes on. And get yourself ready to go.”

I’m 54-years-old now. Now I’m a minister. So, I still have to put on my church clothes and go to church every Sunday. Only, my attitude about it has changed. As an adult, I look forward to worship on Sunday. I used to get my temperature taken to get out of going to church. In these strange times, I’m happy to have my temperature taken in order to get in.

I like to hear the music of the choir and the organ. I like to see familiar faces and reconnect with people. I like that Sunday is different than the other days of the week. I like walking into a place that feels sacred and beginning each week with prayer and thanksgiving.

If you’re like me, you miss gathering in person with your community of faith and you miss gathering in your meetinghouse. The church is a community of people, but sanctuaries are special places. This is your spiritual home. We can meet on Zoom and watch virtual worship, but it’s not quite the same as gathering in this sacred place.

In this morning’s passage from Genesis, Jacob leaves home for the first time. Home was no longer safe for him. He tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the birthright, a double portion of the inheritance, that was supposed to

go to his older brother Esau. Esau wanted blood and Jacob needed to get out of town.

He began a journey toward Haran where he had extended family. When the sun began to set, he stopped in an out-of-the-way place. Jacob was all alone after leaving home for the first time. He was scared. He was on the run. In case it wasn't clear Jacob was in an uncomfortable place, he used a rock as a pillow! That says it all.

I think there's a similarity between Jacob's story and our situation during this pandemic. For this community of faith, this meetinghouse and the surrounding grounds are your spiritual home. At times, you've been carried away by the music here. I'm assuming some of you were married in this room. You walked down the center aisle and said your vows right up here in the chancel area.

For some of you, this place is sacred because your kids stood up on Confirmation Sunday and became members of the church. Maybe you had a child baptized here and you beamed as the gathered community welcomed your little one into the body of Christ. I'll go ahead and assume many of you have a favorite pew or area where you like to sit. I don't know if it's up here on my left or back there on my right. Wherever it is, you miss it.

This meetinghouse is your spiritual home, but just as Jacob's home became unsafe, this is not a safe place to gather right now. Just like Jacob had to leave home, we've all had to leave home, in a sense. We've had to leave our spiritual home and, like Jacob did, we find ourselves in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place.

But here's the thing. It was in that unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation that God became remarkably present to Jacob. First, he dreamt of a ladder reaching from the earth all the way into heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. In his vision, earth and heaven were united.

In addition, God stood beside Jacob and spoke to him. God made a promise similar to the promise made to Abraham. The Lord said, "The land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring." God said, "All the families of the earth will be blessed by you and your descendants." Then God said, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."

I don't know about you, but I find it very interesting that when Jacob found himself alone and vulnerable, that's when God showed up in an unforgettable way. I think this story is an indication that there's something about difficult situations, moments of doubt and uncertainty that allow for something to be revealed.

Maybe that's just how God operates. Maybe God makes it a habit of showing up at those moments when divine assistance is needed most. Or, maybe, in his uncomfortable and vulnerable state, Jacob was more receptive to a divine encounter than ever before. Maybe being all alone and in an unfamiliar place made him unusually open to assistance from beyond himself.

Now, if it's true that hard times and moments of vulnerability allow for God to be revealed more readily, that has implications for the situation in which we find ourselves. Think about it. I'm preaching a candidate sermon in a room that's basically empty. Your poor Search Committee, that's been working on your behalf for months, has been planning and following guidelines that seem to change daily.

There's a lot of fear and disappointment and grief right now. And one way to approach it would be to assume our religious lives are on hold. We can't gather here in God's house. We can't worship together. We can't sing together! It can feel like our relationship with God is on hold...like this experience is merely something to endure and get through.

If Jacob's story is any indication, this is the time to be particularly open to God's revelation. We are where Jacob was. We are in an unfamiliar and

uncomfortable place. What if that's when God shows up? What if in our fear and discomfort we are unusually receptive to divine revelation? I know I'm ready to hear God's voice. I'm ready for the Spirit to reveal something hopeful.

I've been trying to stay open to the idea that maybe there is a gift in this time of separation. I'm not suggesting the loss of life or the financial difficulties this pandemic has caused are somehow worth it. But maybe there is some value in having our religious life interrupted, to miss certain rituals and to experiment with new ways of living our faith.

When Jacob woke from his sleep, he said, "Surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" Jacob did not expect to encounter God in that unremarkable, out-of-the-way place. I know you've experienced the Lord in powerful ways when gathered in this sanctuary, but this is not the only place God can be powerfully present.

God might meet you right where you are now. Surely, the Lord is in this place in which we find ourselves. Surely the Lord is in this place of doubt and uncertainty. Surely the Lord is in this place of distancing and discomfort and we never would have guessed it!

If I could sit and talk with each of you, I would love to ask you a question. Whether I'm your next senior minister or not, the first thing I'd be interested to hear is your reflection on your time since you stopped gathering for worship. Have you had insights into what aspects of church life are essential for you and are there things you've been forced to stop doing that you don't really miss?

Have you discovered anything about yourself or about your discipleship of Jesus? Have your priorities changed? Has God been present to you in surprising ways in these last months? Are there aspects of life at First Parish Church you definitely hope resume and are there things you would change if you could?

I want to know what God has been revealing to you. See, I think God is just as powerfully present where you are at this moment as you've experienced in this meetinghouse. Therefore, this time of distancing isn't merely an interruption. It's not just a pause until we get back to normal. It's an opportunity to reflect and discover and experiment and to grow spiritually.

Certain things are on hold, but not your relationship with God.

Your faith life is not on hold.

This church's ministry is not on hold.

The search process has not been on hold.

In fact, we should expect something important to be revealed during this strange and uncomfortable time. And as difficult as this moment is, I'd be honored to experience it and share in it with you.