

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 11.4.18, Genesis 28:10-22, Haggai 2:1-9, Daniel 7:1; 13-14

Sermon Resources:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=968

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=112

<http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cproper27ot.html>

When we left Jacob last week, he had carried out the instructions of his mother's scheme, they had deceived his blind father, and he had managed to get the blessing traditionally given to the eldest—his brother, Esau—for himself. Wearing goat skin on his arms, and offering food prepared by his mother, he convinced his father that he was Esau, and the plan worked, he got the blessing, he was victorious.

But almost immediately the consequences begin. Isaac recognizes the deception once the real Esau comes in to the room, and so I have to think things were a little frosty between Isaac and Jacob after that. Then Esau decides that when his father dies, he is going to kill Jacob in revenge, so now his life is in danger, too. Rebekah has to quickly come up with a scheme to get Jacob to safety, telling Isaac that she doesn't want Jacob to marry one of the Canaanite women like Esau did, and instead wants him to marry one of their own kin, back in Haran. So Isaac agrees—probably readily, I can't imagine he really wanted Jacob around after this—and before Esau can murder him, Jacob is sent away to his mother's family in Haran.

So in our story today, he's about halfway there—not home anymore, but not where he's going either. He comes to a certain place, and weary, falls asleep on a rock. Now, imagine Jacob here. Our text doesn't tell us how he felt, but maybe we

can guess. I cannot imagine this is how he thought things would go. I bet he thought his father, who had seemed to be dying, might die quickly, and then he, with the birthright and the blessing would have run of the place, that if his brother had tried to act in revenge, he could've just banished him, he would have had the power, the position, the authority, the goods and blessing required for an excellent life.

Instead, here he is, out in the middle of nowhere, no family, no friends, nowhere to stay, no comfortable bed to sleep in. He's left behind a father who knows he deceived him, a brother bent on killing him—the only person left behind who clearly loves him is his mother. He got what he wanted but at great expense to others, and himself. He got what he wanted and still made a mess of things. He's not anywhere special, anywhere familiar, anywhere comfortable. And who even knows how his mother's family might receive him? What his life will be like there? I can imagine him, lying in the dark, head on stone, feeling sad, despairing, hopeless.

And that's when everything changes. He falls asleep and in his dream he sees a vision of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with the angels of God going up and down, and then he hears God's voice promising him that everything is going to turn out okay, that the blessing God has in mind is much bigger even than Jacob's own life, and further promising that God will be with Jacob.

When he wakes up, Jacob is astounded, afraid is the word used, but afraid like, in awe, and he says "Surely the Lord was in this place—and I did not know it". So he makes a bargain, (Jacob is still Jacob after all), but he makes it based on the presence and promise of this God whom he did not realize was there, but who now, he knows, is surely in this place. That's who he's betting on from now on: this God of promise and presence and blessing.

In a place that seemed like nothing, in a situation that seemed hopeless and messy and undone, Jacob is overwhelmed by God's unexpected presence. God's presence in an unexpected place. A promise and blessing beyond what he could have imagined, beyond the ideas of blessing that he and his family held, beyond the comparatively meager blessing he maneuvered away from his brother and father. This God he's encountered is bigger and more powerful and more amazing than any of his daily dreams. What is hopeless is not the end, what seems like nothing can be something, what seems empty and desolate, well surely the Lord is in that place.

That's actually a similar situation to what we see in our passage from Haggai. The people have come back to Jerusalem from exile and, as Haggai says, when they see the crumbling ruins of their temple and towns, it looks to them as nothing. This looks like nothing, empty, hopeless, sad. And Haggai has a vision from the Lord telling them how the temple will be once they rebuild it, the splendor and gifts, the blessings abounding. But even better than that, the Lord says, My spirit will abide with you. Surely the Lord's presence will be in even this place— an unexpected presence, an unexpected place.

And the dreams and visions of Jacob, Haggai, Daniel, seem like amazing things, seem to support the adage "dream big". Daniel sees a Savior coming whose kingdom will have no end, Haggai sees a temple rebuilt and God's presence abiding, Jacob sees a ladder to the heavens and hears a promised blessing for the whole earth. Dream big, indeed.

But, it also can be hard to dream, because dreaming requires hope. And it is often hard to hope in the face of reality, in the face of what appears as nothing, in the face of the stony, empty places we find ourselves. It can be hard to hope and dream in the face of past evidence, who we once were, the things we once did, the hurt we once caused. It can be hard to hope and dream in the face of the fact that

there is so far to go, and the future is uncertain, and who knows when these dreams might come to pass, how long it will take, how much work it will require, the chance that it might not ever happen and we will be disappointed.

Sometimes, in our lives, when we look around, maybe at the mess we've made, or the brokenness of the world, or how the human soul seems desolate and empty right now, it can be hard to hope. When we look at our communities, our churches, our relationships with other people, and it looks as nothing, it looks empty and desolate, it doesn't look like anything hopeful or blessed or splendid. The burden of hope can be a lot to bear, because the dream may be so far from the reality of the damage and cruel words and hateful actions and broken spirits of this world, the dream may be so far from the empty rooms and old patterns, the dream may be so far from who we have been, who we are, the trouble we've gotten ourselves into time and time again, that to hope seems impossible, unexpected, too risky, because it could be disappointed. In fact, it would be easier not to hope, not to dream, not to expect anything, because then we can't be disappointed. Let it all crumble and rot, let our souls darken into oblivion, let everything collapse, let's give up, because there's no use doing otherwise.

And, sometimes, even when we have hope, when we dream, we think well the Lord must be in that place, with that person, over there, in that ideal setting, in that perfect situation, in that exemplary person. Sometimes we look on our lives, our situations, our imperfect places and messy people, and look on them as nothing. We do not expect the Lord's presence.

But as we see in our story, the promises, the blessings, the dreams of God are bigger and far more than we could imagine. Jacob wanted that blessing of the eldest, schemed to take it away from his frail father and envious brother, because he thought that's all the blessing he needed. God's blessing is bigger than that, bigger than Jacob's single life, bigger than his family. To the ends of the earth, God

says. And Jacob sees that's God presence is bigger than he might have imagined, stretches from the earth to the heavens, an endless ladder of holiness.

The promises and blessings and presence of God are far bigger and greater than we can imagine, far broader and greater than what we are in despair over, far bigger and greater than what we fight about, far bigger and greater than what we perceive to be there.

You might remember the show "Bones", that used to be on TV, well, all of the episodes are now online, and I've been watching my favorites, and in one episode, they are investigating a murder within the death metal music circuit, and they're discussing whether death metal is music or not—that's a discussion for another time, but a psychologist tells Dr. Brennan that even though these people they're encountering act like they don't care about anything, that everything is garbage and falling apart, and they want it all to crumble, he says they are not true nihilists, because they create something, they create this music, this performance, and he says, "no true nihilist ever creates anything", they only want destruction and collapse. And with hope and dreams and the vast difference between them and reality, it would be easier to be a nihilist. To work for destruction and give up caring and just let everything collapse. Because you can't be disappointed that way, the way you can with hope and dreams and faith. Nihilists don't create, though. And as people of faith, we follow a God who creates. Who gives visions and dreams of what can be, what could be, possibilities and promises, blessings and hope, presence in unexpected places, ladders to heaven, kingdoms which have no end.

It is part of our faith to believe that things can change, that something more can be, that people can change, that the Lord can be in unexpected places, especially in the places that look to us as nothing, that God's blessings and promises and presence are bigger than what we currently face, that we are helping

build a kingdom which will have no end, where every tear will be wiped away, and all death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Which means we've been given a great gift, as people of faith. Hope is hard to bear, dreams are fragile, but even if we look on something as nothing, even if we do not think the Lord could ever be in a certain place or situation or life, God is broader, and bigger, and offering more than what we imagine. So we can stop getting so caught up in petty squabbles with one another, we can stop confining ourselves to limited ideas, to how things have always been or used to be, to how they are now, we can stop limiting what our lives, our churches, our communities, our world can be. The gift is hope. The gift is expectation. The gift is we can change, situations can change, the world can change. God dreams big, and so can we.

God gives Jacob a promise, a blessing, a dream of something more than his messy life, his limited ideas of blessing, the place that seemed as nothing, because the Lord's presence was there. And Jacob's story goes on from here. And it's not easy, and it's not always simple, and he's not always a great guy. But he goes on to fall in love with Rachel, to marry both her and her sister Leah, to have many children, to work for his uncle Laban for what he gets, to acquire goods and provisions and a life. His story goes on from the mess he's made and the desolate, desperate, hopeless place in which he laid his head on a rock. His story goes on, and ours does, too. The gift of faith is when we come to desolate places, when we feel broken inside, when the heart of the world is angry and dangerous, when the situations we're in are confusing and heartbreaking, when we look out and it all seems as nothing, the gift is that we have a God who inspires us to imagine something more, to imagine something different, and trust that God can work through us to make it happen.

So what is your dream? What do you imagine for your life, your soul, your relationships? What do you imagine you could be, what do you imagine this church could be, what do you imagine this community, this nation, this world could be? I know that it's hard, I know that it's bleak and seems as nothing, but if we don't imagine, if we don't dream God-sized dreams, we have given up an essential part of our faith. In the places that seem as nothing, God is surely in that place. In the broken lives and broken hearts, God is surely in that place. In what is desolate and despairing, God is surely in that place. God is in that place, inspiring us to dream of more, to dream of what can be, beyond this moment.

Let's not give up our hope. Let's not give up our dreaming, our God-inspired imagining. Let's not give up even when the world and our spirits are most broken, let's not accept that empty places will stay that way, that desolate places will be left so. Let's not accept what looks as nothing, and let's dream of what God's presence, and our work can do. Let's dream of what our lives, our church, our community, our world can be. Let's dream and be inspired by God's presence to bring it about. Let's not give up, or close our minds, or lose our hope. Let's be inspired, let's dream God-sized dreams, and let's declare with faith: "surely the Lord is in this place". Amen.