

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 17 July 2011, Proper 11 based upon Genesis 28.

Jacob. He's something else. And on that dark night he almost missed an important encounter with God. He's on the run, banished from his family and community, terrified because he has swindled his brother, Esau, with the cooperation of their mother, Rebekah, and Esau has vowed to come to kill him on the day their father, Isaac, dies.

He is his mother's favorite, Jacob is. His father, Isaac, is old, feeble and blind, and he favors the other son, Esau, an outdoorsman and the first born. Esau will inherit the family's wealth and the responsibility to manage the family, and that honor will occur in a kind of ceremonial conferring of the title, called a blessing, initiated by Isaac. So when the time comes for the blessing Isaac plans a festive meal for Esau and himself. Rebekah, who wants the blessing for Jacob, plans and pulls off one of the greatest scams in history. She prepares her husband's favorite meal, dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, puts goat skin on Jacob's hands and neck to make him feel like Esau. No detail is overlooked. It works. Isaac gives the blessing, the inheritance, to Jacob, thinking he's Esau. When Esau discovers what has happened, he's enraged and promises to kill his brother when their father dies. Rebekah intercedes again, sending Jacob off to the safety of Uncle Laban. Years later, when they finally meet again, Esau does the most remarkable thing: doesn't kill his brother, but when he sees Jacob approaching, bowing in humble contrition—and fear—surrounded by his wives, children, and servants, Esau runs, and the brothers embrace and weep together.

But today's episode in our summer mini-series tells us about the first night after the scam, after the vow to kill was uttered. Jacob is out in the wilderness, alone, exhausted, and scared. He has betrayed his brother and father; he has cheated, stolen what was not his, and somehow he manages to lie down to sleep, with a stone for a pillow.

During the night, Jacob has a dream: a ladder stretching to the heavens; angels ascending, descending. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder," the old camp song puts it; "every rung goes higher, higher." He has a vision of God actually renewing a promise made to Jacob's parents, Rebekah and Isaac, and his grandparents, long gone now, Sarah and Abraham. "I will be with you," God promises Jacob. "I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you home."

"I will be with you." Jacob thought he had God confined to heaven. God, in the best thinking of the day—was the powerful but remote King of the Universe, off somewhere in the sky observing things on earth below. It is a neat and tidy and manageable system. That is challenged and changed in this remarkable account. God is not remote but here; transcendent but also immanent.

The giant scholar of Bible, Walter Brueggemann says, "Jacob assumed heaven and earth were entirely separate worlds, that God stays in heaven and that he, Jacob, travels alone." But wonder of wonders, "there is traffic between heaven and earth." "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go," (see Interpretation: Genesis, pp. 242–244).

Where do you see, in your life, traffic between heaven and earth? Do you ever hear God's promise: I will be with you and keep you wherever you go?

An essay from the psychologist and spiritual director Gunilla Norris helps. She says, "Many of us are juggling so many things that we are run by our lives rather than living them as gifts from God. What if we could learn to stop for a moment many times a day? What if in those moments we could decide to notice the sheer miracle of being alive? We would then be taking awe breaks instead of coffee breaks" (Gunilla Norris, "The Heart of Responsibility," Weavings, July/August 2008).

I was interested in the goings-on of Mrs. Ford's burial rites this past week, partly because she was a great churchwoman, partly because I'm from Michigan, and partly because of her incredible contributions to our nation's awareness about breast cancer and recovery from addictions. During Thursday's liturgy at Grace Church in East Grand Rapids, her son Steven spoke powerfully about his mother's faith in God through Christ; claiming it as truth for himself as well. Mr. Ford said that his parents prayed every day, and that the most profound gift they ever gave him was the promise of God's presence.

This old story of Jacob's bids us to pay attention, to slow down and see, to take awe breaks every day as well as coffee breaks, to make time and space for God to be with us and touch us. And this old story promises something greater: "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go."

And there's yet more good news because of the planted seeds of incarnation which bloomed centuries later when a child came whose name was Emmanuel. We believe that child, the man the child became, was indeed God among us, living our life, growing into adulthood as we do, experiencing everything—the joys and hopes and disappointments, the high energy of life and times of weariness. That he, Emmanuel, "God with us," suffered as we do and died our very death in all its dreaded finality—and rose again. We believe Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of that ancient promise, that because of him we are never alone—and that this banquet-- where all are welcomed-- which we celebrate week in and week out is both sign and symbol of that promise.

A blessing came in the middle of the night long ago to a man called Jacob. A blessing comes to you and to me whenever we turn to face the living God, and it comes just as clearly as it did to Jacob; perhaps you can hear God's voice: "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you home."