

## **Discovering God in the Hard Places**

Psalm 139:1-10; Genesis 28:10-22

*“Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place; but I did not know it!’”*

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley  
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

August 26, 2012

### **Scripture Introduction**

The Bible has many stories of people in dislocation; where they find themselves in a strange, unknown land, far away from the comforts of home. Some are running away from God, like Jonah; or like the Psalmist we just read, *“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence...If I would take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me fast.”* Others, through circumstances beyond their control, end up in a strange land of exile, feeling very much alone,...only to discover that God was there to meet them, in fact that God had brought them there for a very important purpose.

Where we pick up God’s Salvation Story today is with Jacob, Sarah and Abraham’s grandson, the son of Isaac. These are Jesus’ ancestors; and the more one reads through the Old Testament, one realizes what a dysfunctional family Jesus came out of! Through intrigue and deception, Jacob tricked his blind, old father, Isaac, into giving him the family blessing, when his older twin brother, Esau, was out hunting. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, once the family blessing is given, with its inheritance and its status, it cannot be taken back again. So Jacob sneaked into old, blind Isaac’s tent, when he was on his death bed; he pretended to be Esau, and the old confused man gave it to the younger twin. Esau found out about it, and swore to take revenge upon brother Jacob. *“Was this scoundrel not rightly named?”* said Esau bitterly. *Jacob* in Hebrew means *“the one who grasps by the heel,”* because at birth Esau came first, and his younger twin was not far behind, holding on to the first-born’s heel (Genesis 25:19-26). So, this *“grasper”* is warned by his mother, Rebekah, who tells him to flee back north to Haran, their ancestral home, and take refuge with her brother, Laban. Jacob runs for his life.

Now, as this famous scripture of *“Jacob’s Ladder”* is read this morning, I’d like you to try and feel what Jacob is feeling on this first lonely night away from home. *“The sun had set”*—

over the bleak Palestinian landscape, and over his life. No lamp, no light, pitch dark except for the stars overhead. Jacob had always been a homebody, a mother's boy, never been away from home (Genesis 25:27-28). It's hard to feel any sympathy for Jacob; he is reaping the consequences of his own conniving. But crawl into Jacob's skin for a moment; let's have a little sympathy for this boy. Was he scared, out in the open fields? Was he feeling guilty toward brother Esau? Perhaps he was watching the shadows, listening for any breaking twigs that might be Esau following him? Was he missing his mother, like a child who is on his first overnight at camp? Was he despondent that, after all his ambition to get the family blessing, now he had to leave it behind, never to be seen again? Let us listen for the Word of God: **Genesis 28:10-19**

## **Discovering God in the Hard Places**

We hate dislocations, don't we. I mean, I realize that sometimes a new place, and new opportunities are exciting and positive. But we like the familiar, and it's hard to let go what we leave behind. When there are circumstances beyond our control that force us to move, it is especially distressing. We feel our lives are in chaos, and we are in exile. Clarksville is a place of such dislocations: The Army moves men and women and their families into our city, and then deployments separate them. The coming home is a joyous thing; yet the re-adjustments are also stressful, to say the least. Austin Peay State University brings in others to a new life and new place, while other Clarksville families say a tearful farewell to their kids as they go off to college far away from home.

There are other kinds of dislocation that are equally stressful—leaving a business or a job that is all that you know, and looking for a job anywhere, or re-careering into something completely different. There are the dislocations of health that require the special care of Assisted Living or rehabilitation. There are the painful dislocations of family through divorce; others through the death of a loved one.

So, in one way or another, many of us are there with Jacob in that dark night, on an open field, when the sun has set....going from the place of the familiar, to a new unknown home. It has been said that FAITH OFTEN BEGINS WITH SOME GREAT DISLOCATION. Do you think that is true?...that Faith begins with some momentous dislocation, when our lives are destabilized in one way or another?

I had a colleague with whom I worked on the staff of my former church, who had an experience like this. In high school, his father had an affair with a woman in his church, ended up leaving his mother and family for this other woman. Thomas was 16 at the time, and so angry at his father, disillusioned with the church, that he slammed the door of the church and never darkened a church door for the next 6 years. He went off to Davidson College, did plenty of partying, never found what he wanted to do with his life; nevertheless, graduated with honors in History. He had no intentions of going home at this point; but neither did he want to go to grad school, as some of the professors had urged him to do. So he decided to distance himself even further from home by fleeing half way around the world to teach English to young Japanese students, and coach basketball. So there he was, alone in a far-out suburb of Kobe, Japan, with no American friends except for a few others who were participating in this same English teaching, scattered around the wider Kobe area.

This group of young teachers and coaches would have gatherings every month or so to share experiences, and sharpen each others' skills. It was at one of these gatherings that Thomas was

particularly attracted to a pretty young Welsh woman named Beth. They struck up a friendship, and she invited him to a gathering of Christians in the area, which was the last thing he wanted to do; but to be with her, he went. Cynically he went; reluctantly he went.

Later on, Beth invited Thomas to a baptism service, where one of her Japanese friends was to be baptized as a new Christian. Again, he went to be with her. When he got to the place, he said it was like a United Nations; there were Australians, New Zealanders, Koreans, Scandinavians, British, Japanese, and Americans. But the moment in that gathering that changed his life came as a totally unplanned, unexpected encounter. He said, “When I watched that young Japanese woman, immersed beneath the water in the large Baptist-like tub, come up out of the water, there was a radiance in her face that was dazzling... almost other-worldly.” And he knew, despite his years of disdain and anger toward the church, there was something real here that he had to pursue. And for the first time, there was a glimpse of a Purpose for his life.

He pursued that experience all the way to the altar in a little church in Wales, where he and Beth were married; and from there to Columbia Seminary in Atlanta; and to his ordination as Minister of Word and Sacrament in the church he had grown up in and despised for all those years. Today Thomas is planting a new Presbyterian church among the upwardly mobile young adults in the heart of Atlanta.

*“Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!’” (Genesis 28:16)*

Tell me, do you have a Dream?...a Dream for your life, I mean. A vision of what your life could be. It doesn't matter if you're just starting out in life, as Thomas was; or if you are way up there in years, and in this new season of your life, you need to figure out how to “bloom where you are,” with all the limitations you are experiencing. The Dream that God gives is how you can be a BLESSING to the world. It is the same blessing the Lord gave to Abraham and Sarah, and then to Jacob, on that dark night, when the sun had set, and he thought it was all over for him, and he was all alone. *“But he saw the Lord standing beside him; and the Lord said, ‘I will bless you, and in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed’”* (Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 28:13-14). That's your Purpose.

You may be headed off to Afghanistan, to lead men and women in dangerous places, to try to make a better world; or you may be headed back to your retirement home where people are complaining about the food and maybe about their neighbors. But you see, you are not there by accident. “Christ who lives within you has something he wants to do through you.” (Richard Halverson, former Chaplain of the Senate)

And with that Purpose, comes a Promise... (Genesis 28:15) *“Know that I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go...”* Sound familiar? Jesus’ last words to His disciples, *“Go and make other disciples, and remember, I will be with you always...”* (Matthew 28:19-20). You are not alone in fulfilling this Purpose. It’s not all up to you, except to follow the prompts. You will be given a Presence, and a Power greater than your own.

Yes! It is a wonderful moment when you awaken to the discovery, *“Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it!”* Alleluia! Amen.