

CYA Faith - Sermon Based on Genesis 28:10-22
by David Hindman on Sunday, July 17, 2011

A summertime highlight for Teri's dad growing up was Camp Meeting. Camp meeting - an odd mix of socializing, People gathered from miles around for a couple of weeks of socializing with distant friends brought close, vacation, family reunion, and religious revival. .

To this camp meeting one preacher famously came every summer with his legendary "Jacob's Ladder" sermon. Yearly he'd raise a pole in the middle of the campground and preach while shimmying up and down the pole. Going up he preached about drawing closer to God; sliding down brought descriptions of how we move away from God. In its day it was a truly dramatic way to get people thinking about where they were in their relationship with God. It was a summer highlight until the year Teri's dad and a friend greased the pole. Mortified and stymied, that poor preacher never got off the ground and neither did his sermon.

Whenever I sing "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" I remember that prank. This week I realized that both sermon and song miss the point of the story and have little in common with it. Both preacher and song think Jacob's ladder is about us and what we do in relation to God. We're the ones drawing closer or moving away from God; we're the ones climbing

every rung higher, higher. But in the Genesis story Jacob does nothing but lie there and dream. Those on the ladder are heavenly beings, not human. First word and promise are God's. Jacob does nothing except respond to God's first move, and even then he cautiously holds his cards close. So what's going on in this story that we think we know well, but may know hardly at all.

In the story Jacob's running for his life. He's tricked brother Esau again and this time Esau's sworn to kill him. So mother Rebekah sends Jacob packing to live with her brother Laban until things cool down. Jacob's on the lam and as the sun sets, he decides to call it a day and settle in for the night. With a stone for a pillow he hopes to sleep like a rock.

Jacob's gone from home and not yet arrived, at a nowhere place between places, and as the sun sets in that twilight time between times of light and dark he settles down for the night. Utterly alone on his own. Vulnerable. At risk. Not a good time or place to be. Up to now Jacob's lived by his own wits and schemes with nary a nod to God or relationship with God. And now he dreams of a ladder or a ramp or in the words of Led Zeppelin, a stairway to heaven. Heavenly beings go up and down as go-between messengers communicating this world and the reality beyond. And

as he dreams he hears God speak words of promise to him. In heaven's name what on earth's going on?

Social scientists would say Jacob's having a liminal experience. He's in an in-between situation of dislocation, fear and uncertainty. He's entering a new phase of life and a new reality and he's not in control. He's unsure how it's all going to turn out, walking on a planet without gravity. Life's up for grabs and might fly off into a black hole. Mix in the idea that there are "thin places" in the world where the realms of spirit and matter more easily connect. Perhaps it's no accident that Jacob's laid himself down to sleep here; perhaps God is at work in this thin place and time to get through more easily so Jacob will go a different way. Precisely in that time and place of uncertainty and vulnerability and divine possibility, Jacob hears this precious promise. The God who guided and guarded Abraham and Isaac every step of the way will be with Jacob, too, even beyond borders. This God still promises land and children and blessing to others through Jacob. But there's more: Jacob travels into an unknown future with God's encouraging word - don't be afraid. I'll be with you and protect you. I'll see you through and bring you home again safe. It's so dark Jacob can't see his hand in front of his face or how to put one foot in front of the other but God's there to lead and promise all will be well. Jacob doesn't buy it 100%

and responds with some ifs ands and buts, but he does set out, open to the possibility that God is reliable and better things lie ahead thanks to this faithful God.

And what does that have to do with us? Everything. We live in an in-between time and place and feel dislocated and uncertain as we enter a new world and a new day. Feel like we're in control? Fearful for how it's all going to turn out? Everything up for grabs and we're hurtling toward a black hole? So scared you want to circle the wagon? You're not alone. I feel your pain and fear and so does God. But like Jacob we might be on the verge of receiving a wonderful and unexpected gift from that same God. It's unsettling for some to imagine that in 40 years white folks will be a minority in America. What's that new day going to bring? After the American Century of being the sole super power, how will we adjust when that's not the case? Beyond all that mostly I think about this: how will we live as Christ followers in a new secular world where faith is clearly optional and following Jesus is just one choice among many. We still act like Christianity is the default drive religious option, but the day of Christian values, perspectives, stories and traditions shaping this culture is over. Christendom is dead and gone. Most of us haven't gotten that memo yet so it's still relatively easy to join a church; but following Jesus is something

quite different. Nice folks belonging to a church and fitting it into life whenever convenient – that’s a club, not following Jesus. We’re in an in-between time and place to re-think what discipleship means and how following Jesus is going to rub raw against much of what a 24/7 society where literally nothing is sacred, except maybe the Almighty dollar or rabid individualism. In this dawning new day we can learn a lot from our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. They’ve known all along that to be a person of deep faith is to be a non-conformist weird outsider with different priorities and values from those who go their own way instead of the way of holiness.

In this in between time and place it’s tempting to be resentful and try to force a return to the good old days. Fear tempts us to play it safe, hunker down, calculate risk, or go into survivor mode hoping it doesn’t go south in our lifetime. And here comes God saying to this dreamer, don’t be afraid! I am with you! Move into an unknown future with brave hearts. I’ll see you through. Beyond your fear - blessing happens. Don’t hold back or resist my future’s pull like a stubborn donkey: my strong, steady arms will catch you so leap into my future!

Jacob thought he had to take matters into his hands. He thought his future was his to control and manage. Until he had this dream of a stairway to heaven, he was an atheist living life on his terms. God was a nice idea but

didn't really make a difference one way or the other and so Jacob paid him no mind. Jacob was the master of his fate and captain of his soul. And then the unnoticed God who was there all along unexpectedly intruded into dreams and life, promising blessing. Sometimes we are a church of atheists, too. We say the right things and sing the right songs and mouth prayers in church and at meetings and then go on without seeking God's will like God has nothing to do with it or to say to us. We act like it's all up to us to guard and protect the church because deep down we're afraid God won't come through or deliver on promises made. But God says CYA: change your attitude. Trust and believe my promises. Move out in faith - don't be afraid! I'm birthing a new world and want you for midwives. Be at my service; pray and study and listen and learn and live for me in this strange new world! Life and blessing are my gifts to you! I'm with you keeping you wherever you go. Count on it - I will not leave you until I've done what I promised. Don't be afraid: now move!