

Stacking Stones

Genesis 28: 10-16

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[c] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Imagine Jacob on the run. The "trickster," Jacob, just fooled his blind, old father into giving him the blessing promised to his brother, Esau. As a result of the betrayal, Esau has sworn to get even. As Jacob flees from the consequences, he keeps looking over his shoulder. His heart is pounding. His thoughts, racing. He's anxious, weary, vulnerable. As dusk closes in, Jacob stops to rest his head in an unfamiliar spot. It is here we find Jacob falling asleep, unsure of what the next day is going to bring.

Well, we know the feeling. The sense of our own uncertainty hangs heavy in the air. Since March we have been fumbling along, not knowing what is next. At this point we probably all know of someone who has gotten sick. 140,000 thousand gone after four long isolating months. Our parents and teachers are overwhelmed about the complex needs of students in a broken system. Times. Are. Uncertain.

For us church folk, we thought at one point that we might be back together to worship by September. But as the uptick in cases continues, we have to recalibrate again. According to local epidemiologists from Baptist Hospital, when asked when we can sing from hymn books or help the kids get their snacks in the Fellowship Hall, they said the earliest would probably be one year from now...July 2021...ugh! We are stuck on this emotional life raft, navigating the ups and downs in survival mode. Just thinking about doing this for another year is...deflating. So we know the feeling of being in unfamiliar territory. Like Jacob, we are camped out in uncertain times, not knowing what is next.

But in the mysterious in-between-place God shows up. God catches Jacob in a vulnerable moment as he dreams of a ramp connecting heaven with earthy soil. Busy angels scurrying back

and forth between the two realms. And then God stands next to Jacob and offers three words to him; as well as three words to us.

The first word God says is “I will be with you.” If you are like me, when all the coping mechanisms have rusted out, and the survival strategies are no longer working, I need the reminder: God is with us. I have a friend who did not grow up going to church. She was in a powerless place and at her wits end. She was not sure she was going to get through what she was facing. Honest to God, in the middle of the night she woke up and heard a voice tell her: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” Not knowing the bible very well she Googled the phrase and found it came from Isaiah 41:10. It has always been God’s first word to us. To Jacob, to the prophets, to the name given to Jesus when he is born...Emmanuel. Whenever we find ourselves in the vulnerable place, God’s first word is, “I will be with you.”

The second word God tells Jacob is “I will keep you.” In other words, wherever we are, we belong to God. Perhaps it is our truest comfort. That when everything else hits the fan, when we are feeling like we have run out of options the deepest assurance God can offer us is that we are not alone—but belong—to God. Now, I have to be honest, when I first heard someone say this I thought *yeah, yeah, whatever...* But as we sit vulnerably in the midst of a pandemic, in control of so little, in the whirlpool of anxiety of not knowing what is next, the words have become essential for me: We are not alone—but belong—to God.

Which brings us to the third word God promises to Jacob in the territory of the unknown: “I will use you as a blessing.” It’s a word of purpose. Just because we are stuck in our homes doesn’t mean we no longer have a ministry. Just because we aren’t meeting in the church does not mean we have ceased to be the church. The first couple of weeks when COVID hit, I put on our website that the church was CLOSED. But I was wrong. We don’t stop being the church any more than God stops being God. We still have work to do. We still have love to share. More than ever we have justice to strive for and blessings to bring. God catches Jacob in the vulnerable moment and offers three words to Jacob and three words to us: “I will be with you. I will keep you. I will use you.”

So, what does Jacob do when he wakes up from the dream? He marks the moment. He says, “God is here” and he builds an Ebenezer. He stacks stones as if stacking God’s promises, one on top of the other. My sense is: if we are going to get through this season with any ounce of sanity left, we are going to have to stack the memories where God’s love snuck into our lives. So maybe we take a stone and write a word on it, marking a moment during this time period. Could be a hard moment, or a peaceful moment, when we felt God saying, “I will be with you.” Or maybe we write a word on a stone about when someone reached out to us during a bad day, as if they were summoned by the Holy Spirit to check in on us. And their kindness reminded us: we belong to a community who cares, and we belong. Or maybe on one of the stones we write “Black Lives Matter” or “I can’t breathe” as a reminder of God’s movement against racism and our own purpose during this time. We need to stack the words to mark this moment; to remind us: surely, God is right here, in this place, even when we didn’t know it.

So, I would like you to think about a moment over these last few months where you have sensed God's presence, or provision, or purpose. Please feel free to share it in the chat box or name it during our prayers. Or grab a stone and write on it and start stacking them some place in your yard where you can be reminded.

In these vulnerable, stressful, uncertain times, if you're anything like me, then you will need these markers as an inspiration to keep going. They are the concrete stories of God's words to us, one on top of the other: I will be with you. I will keep you. I will use you.