

sermon-7/20/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Gateways Into Heaven”
Gen. 28:10-19a and Ps. 139:1-12, 23-24

Let's be clear about one thing right from the start. Jacob was not a nice man. That may not be saying it strong enough. It may be more accurate to say he was a jerk. He took advantage of his twin brother, Esau, twice. He stole his birthright and his blessing.

When you read about Jacob's family, it is no wonder he turned out the way he did. He belongs to one of the most dysfunctional families in all the Bible. His father Isaac was rather pathetic. No doubt he was scarred by that experience early in his life when Abraham, his father, almost sacrificed him on the mountain. We never hear how that affected Isaac, but it seems to have not done him much good.

Isaac is a distant, ineffective father at best. He loves one son, Esau, more than the other primarily because Esau could kill animals and bring him meat to eat. It is a sad day when a father's stomach determines how much he loves his children.

The mother, Rebekah, is hardly much better. She loves Jacob more than Esau. Jacob, after all, liked to hang around the tent, maybe helping his mother with the chores when Esau went hunting. Rebekah even tricks her husband into giving Jacob the blessing meant for his brother. Talk about favoritism!

The relationship between the two brothers is hardly loving. Esau appears to be like what we would call today the classic jock on steroids. He is hairy and hungry and quick to fight. He is easily manipulated by his more domestic brother who uses his brains to defeat Esau's brawn.

Yet, it is this rogue, Jacob, from this dysfunctional family, who has this incredible experience of God. We can't help asking how this could happen and why? It was certainly not because Jacob was religious in any way.

Maybe it was fleeing for his life from his brother's anger that opened a space in his heart to recognize God. Maybe it was being all alone in the wilderness, away from anything familiar, away from all the distractions of normal life, that created an emptiness God could inhabit.

We do know this experience came to Jacob in what the Bible calls a dream. Some scholars talk about this dream being an altered state of consciousness. Dreams are a favorite way that God's revelation comes to people in the Bible. Joseph, in the Old Testament, was a dreamer. Joseph, Mary's husband, in the New Testament, was also a dreamer. Even today dreams play an important role for God's prophets. Martin Luther King had a dream that has inspired countless folks in our day to try and live into the equality between the races he saw in that dream.

When commentators analyze Jacob's dream they notice two things. First, the God he encounters is not a God associated with a particular place. God is identified as the God of Abraham and Isaac. God is a God of relationships more than anything else. We understand God by how other people experience God in their lives. One of the strengths of the Judeo/Christian religion for me is that God finally cannot be captured by our finite minds, or made to fit our territorial prejudices. God is known most intimately in relationships far more than in written words.

Second, Jacob experienced God in terms of promises. Those promises involved land and children. Those two promises were not something Jacob could even see in his life at that time. He was out in the wilderness away from any land he could call home. And he was unmarried.

As one commentator put it, God's vision for our lives is beyond what we can see, beyond what is immediately before us. The present won't utterly define the future. It may look grim in the present, but when God becomes part of the equation, the future is not determined by the present. That is our basis for hope.

When Jacob wakes from his dream he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it!" Many of us could have made that confession countless times in our lives. We miss God's presence even though we know that it is in God that we live and move and have our being. God is all around us and we seldom notice.

That is part of why we are drawn to this story. We long for gateways into heaven, for glimpses of eternity in our tired, ordinary lives. We want to be connected to something, to someone who can lift us out of the dead ends we find ourselves inhabiting.

Why don't we experience God more often? Psalm 139 says God is everywhere. There is not any place where we can go, not even into the depths of chaos, into utter darkness, that God is not already there waiting for us. Why don't we experience this ever-present God?

It is partly a matter of perception. One of my favorite stories is about a monk who is walking through a graveyard. He is trampling all over the graves seemingly unaware of how he is offending people. Finally someone comes up to him and yells, "Are you ignorant? Why do you walk all over this sacred ground? Where are your manners? And the monk replies, "Good sir, if you would kindly tell me which part of the earth is not sacred, is not filled with God's presence, and I will gladly walk there."

All the world is filled with God. There is no place we can be that is not holy ground: not the work place, not the home, not the playground, and not even the grave. There are countless gateways into heaven. We just need hearts to sense God's presence hidden in the ordinary.

I want to turn again to Ron Rolheiser. I seem to be quoting him often these days. I am rereading his book subtitled "Rediscovering A Felt Presence of God" because it has opened up my eyes in ways few books have.

Rolheiser says we are in an age that is basically non-contemplative. We have not developed much of a symbolic way to make sense of our experience. Let me quote this remarkable passage. “Where the contemplative might refer to his erotic aching as ‘immortal longings,’ the non-contemplative is more prone to speak of ‘being horny’; where the contemplative speaks of ‘a providential meeting,’ the non-contemplative is more likely to speak of ‘an accident’; where the contemplative speaks of finding a ‘soul mate,’ the non-contemplative speaks of ‘great chemistry’ . . . where the contemplative talks of human restlessness as ‘a nostalgia for the infinite and a sign of being a pilgrim on earth,’ the non-contemplative feeling the same discontent will wonder if he needs a career change or a new marriage.”

Rolheiser says this non-contemplative way of seeing life leads to “a practical atheism.” We may say we believe in God, but we live our lives as if God is not present or hardly a factor in our decisions or how we relate to others or even how we understand ourselves.

But, he writes, “When we perceive reality in a non-practical, non-controlling, and admiring way, we are being contemplative. . . There is a fundamental shift in our attitude towards reality when we perceive it contemplatively. From wondering how and wondering whether, we begin a wondering at. The door to the invisible begins to open and we sense a previously unperceived depth within ordinary reality.”

All of this can sound so academic, so vaguely spiritual or ethereal, but it is far more than that. How we define reality changes how we see. Ultimately it changes us. I believe that is what happened to Jacob in the wilderness. The ever-present God was suddenly glimpsed and it changed his life. Jacob remained a scheming rogue, to be sure, but he also became a major figure in salvation history. In fact, as often happens in the Bible, he received a new name: Israel.

So, too, when we center our lives on God’s presence, and begin to look at life from what Rolheiser calls a contemplative perspective, we will experience gateways to heaven all over the place. Instead of our world being flat, instead of only taking life at face value, with no depth, we will get lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen