

Still Here. Still Here

Genesis 28:10-17

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Jacob was on the run. I wrote a little rhyme to explain why Jacob was on the run.

- At childbirth he grabbed his older brother's heel.
- He bought his brother's birthright for a tasty meal.
- With his mother he connived that older brother's blessing to steal.
- The older brother decided the younger to kill.
- So, Jacob fled, not wanting his blood to spill.

Jacob's older brother was Esau. After all the deception Esau held a grudge against Jacob. His anger boiled over. Knowing that his father was old and soon to die, Esau said to himself, "When my father dies, I will kill my brother Jacob." That leads directly to our passage today from Genesis 28, the passage that tells us, "Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran."

As he journeyed, he stopped for the night at a certain place, put a rock under his head for a pillow, and had a dream. What a dream he had. He saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven. Angels were ascending and descending on that ladder. And the Lord was there, above the ladder. And the Lord was speaking in the dream, telling Jacob, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you." When Jacob awoke from his sleep he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Running in fear from his brother Esau, all alone, on a journey to who knows where, uncertain about his future, Jacob had a dream. In the dream God told him, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." The symbol of God's presence was this strange ladder that appeared in the dream. It was a ladder connecting heaven and earth. It was a ladder on which angels ascended and descended. And it was a ladder with God at the top, saying he would watch over Jacob, saying indeed he was with Jacob, and that he would not leave Jacob.

For the rest of his life Jacob carried that ladder with him. He took the ladder with him to his uncle Laban's land, where he fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. Jacob loved Rachel so much he worked seven years to marry Rachel, only to wake up from his wedding night and find he had been tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah. Jacob was eventually given Rachel in marriage as well, along with their two maids, which meant Jacob had four wives who gave him twelve sons and a daughter to boot, along with a massive flock of speckled and spotted goats. Whenever this crazy life with multiple wives, an uncle who couldn't be trusted, and jealousies among his children and his wives, whenever things got too crazy for Jacob, he would wander out to the backside of his tent and hold that ladder of his up to the sky. He would look to the top rung of that ladder and ask, "You still there, God?" God's answer would come back, "Still here, Jacob."

After some twenty years Jacob went back home to face the music. His caravan was a sight to behold, all the wives, all the maids, all the children, all the goats, and all the baggage of that broken relationship with his brother. Ah yes, the baggage. No matter how much he brought home with him, he could never forget what he left behind, mainly one angry brother who was intent on killing him. The night before he met back up with Esau, a night that must have been filled with fear and anxiousness, Jacob wrestled with God. Jacob threw his ladder down on the ground, grabbed hold of God, and demanded to know, "You still there, God? I'm about to meet angry old Esau. I need you to be with me. Are you still there, God?" God's answer came back loud and clear during that wrestling match. "Still here, Jacob. I'm still here."

All went well when the brothers met. Esau forgave. Life went on. The children of Jacob grew. But those twelve sons from four mothers was like a fire waiting to ignite. Throwing caution to the wind Jacob poured some gasoline on that fire. Jacob played favorites. He loved his son Joseph more than the others. He gave Joseph a special robe. This definitely did not sit well with the brothers. The brothers threw Joseph in a pit, sold him to some travelers heading to Egypt, and made up a fib about Joseph being attacked and killed by wild animals. They showed the bloody robe to prove it. It might be hard to muster much sympathy for Jacob. He didn't treat his brother well. His family leadership seemed often to be lacking. And his parenting skills were downright atrocious. But holding that robe in his hands, knowing his beloved son had died, it is hard not to let your heart go out to Jacob. Late at night Jacob slowly made his way behind his tent to where that old ladder was lying on the ground. Holding the torn and bloody robe in his hands, a bereaved father lifted that ladder up. Jacob lifted the ladder up, but he could barely lift his head to look up to that top rung. With tears streaming down his face, can you hear Jacob asking, "You still there, God? My son has died. Are you still there? I need to know if you are still there?" From the top rung of a ladder that seemed a million miles away, God spoke softly and gently to Jacob, "Still here, Jacob. I'm still here."

The last time I needed a ladder my situation was not near as dire as Jacob's. No life had been lost. No family relationship had been broken. There was no heated argument or act of betrayal. The last time I needed a ladder was because of coyotes. Sounds kind of dramatic when I put it like that. But it is really not dramatic at all. Because we do have coyotes in our neighborhood, on dark mornings I carry a coyote whistle when we run...just in case. Well, I keep the coyote whistle next to our house key. One dark and dreary morning Julie, who might have been either distracted or even feeling a little groggy early in the morning, but one morning Julie grabbed the house key as we headed out for our early morning run. We had gone a mile or two and were finally fully awake. Running side by side I heard Julie say, "Oh no." Not what you want to hear when you are out running. "Oh no. I grabbed the coyote whistle." Well, it is not a bad thing to grab the coyote whistle. But I'm supposed to carry the coyote whistle. She is supposed to carry the house key. She had the coyote whistle. I said, "Oh no. Does that mean you don't have the house key?" That is exactly what it meant. We spent the next forty minutes of our run brainstorming how to get in the house without our house key.

No one who had a spare key could be reached. We got home and stared at our house, our warm, welcoming house. So close...and yet so far. We were locked out of our own house. At least we would be able to defend ourselves against the coyotes. Not many other bright spots when you are locked out and all you have with you is a coyote whistle. Speaking of whistles, our neighbor Bruce came whistling down the path with his two dogs. Bruce is always friendly. He is the son of Joyce and Joe Dionne. Bruce is a wonderful neighbor. Unfortunately, we had never thought to give Bruce a key. The three of us looked at our house...so close...but so far. Boy, we wished Bruce had a house key. It turns out, Bruce had something else of value. Bruce had a ladder. We had left the sliding door on our upstairs deck unlocked. Bruce propped his ladder against our upstairs deck, zipped up the ladder, opened the door, raced downstairs, and we narrowly avoided being eaten by coyotes. I'm not sure when God used a ladder to tell old Jacob he would always be with him whether the idea even entered the mind of the Lord that thousands of years later a forgetful couple would also need a ladder. That is kind of far-fetched, don't you think? But with God, you never know. Maybe the ladder God gave Jacob was a ladder he intended us all to be able to rely on.

In fact, maybe that idea is not so far-fetched after all. God gave the ladder to Jacob. God also gave Jacob a new name, the name Israel. Jacob's ladder was Israel's ladder. Israel's beloved son Joseph had been thrown down in a pit by his jealous brothers. He was stuck. In that dark pit he kicked something with his foot. He reached down to touch what he kicked, and he discovered it was a ladder. It was

Jacob's ladder. It was Israel's ladder. And now it was his ladder. He propped that ladder up against the wall of the pit. He looked up to that top rung. He asked the question that people of faith ask when they are in a bad way. "You still there, God?" The answer from above brought light into that dark and dismal pit. "Still here. I'm still here."

Moses led the people from their bondage in Egypt into the desert where they faced struggles as they journeyed, struggles about bread, struggles about water, struggles about leadership, struggles, and struggles. One day they arrived at a mountain. Moses did not know how to lead the people. Fortunately, he had held onto that old ladder that he thought might come in handy someday. He leaned that ladder up against that big old mountain and he looked up to the top rung. "You still there, God? We are all alone out in the wilderness. I'm kind of in over my head. Are you still there?" The word came back from the top of the ladder. "Still here, Moses. I'm still here. In fact, climb up your ladder to the top of this mountain. I have something I want to give you. I think it will come in handy in terms of leading these people." Moses climbed that ladder and came back down with the Ten Commandments. As God handed Moses those commandments he winked and said, "Still here, Moses. Still here."

Joshua just about fainted when he saw how tall and massive and fortified those walls of Jericho were. He grabbed the ladder Moses had passed on to him and he leaned that old ladder against that fortified wall, that impregnable wall, that imposing wall, and Joshua looked up, looked way up, all the way up that dreaded wall, and he shouted toward the top rung. "Are you still there, God?" God's voice was unmistakable that day. "Still here, Joshua. Now you be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for I will be with you wherever you go. Joshua, I'm still here."

David marched out to face that beastly giant of a man known as Goliath. All David had was a slingshot and several smooth stones...all David had was a slingshot, several smooth stones...and his grandfather's ladder. David looked up at that massive mountain of a man and wondered, "How tall is six cubits and a span?" So he leaned the ladder up against the trunk of that cursed giant and looked up...six cubits and a span...that is over nine feet tall. With that ladder seemingly dwarfed by Goliath, little shepherd boy David yelled to the top rung of the ladder, "Still there, God?" God replied in a strangely cheerful voice. "Still here, David. And I've put a bullseye right on this old giant's forehead. Take aim and plunk a stone where X marks the spot, and all will be well." God was still there for David.

When I needed a ladder a while back, and our good friend Bruce was scampering up his ladder on his rescue mission, it was one small way of God assuring us, “Still here. Wayne, Julie, I’m still here.” But I was not being completely honest when I said that was the last time I needed a ladder. There was the day we were leaving Houston after a wedding, hearts filled with joy because we had spent time with our kids and our good friends. We drove to the airport, ready to hop on our flight and return home to Rhode Island, grateful for all God’s blessings. As our car approached the airport Julie answered a call from our daughter-in-law Tay. She told us Alex got his results back from his test and the results showed cancer. We needed a ladder that day. We needed to know if God was still there. A few weeks ago, Alex called us and told us that Tay’s heart surgery had not been successful and they were not able to correct the problem leading to her abnormal heartbeat. They would have to try again at a later point. We sat down after receiving that news and instinctively we reached for the ladder. “You still there, God?”

In my years as a pastor I have stumbled upon Jacob’s ladder many a time. A friend back in Houston told me his wife had Alzheimer’s. It was getting pretty bad. She was in a care facility and he would go visit her every day. He would take her grapefruit because she loved grapefruit. Many days she did not remember him. Many days she did not remember his name. But she remembered the grapefruit. He would feed her, and she would smile. Day after day Roy would drive out to that care facility to visit his wife. When he would park the car, he would pull the ladder off the roof of the car. He would lean that ladder against the side of the care facility. Then he would look up. He would look up for a long time. He would look way up in the sky. Eventually he would say, “Still there, Lord?” The answer would come to him. Day after day the answer would come to him. “Still here, Roy. Still here.” So Roy would put the ladder away, grab the grapefruit from the front seat of the car, and head in to see his wife.

Every cemetery has one. Every hospital has one. Every battlefield has one. Every place of ministry where people face the challenges of reaching out to the least, to the last, to the lost, every place of ministry where you can come so close to losing hope, every place of ministry has one. Every school where teachers pour their hearts out because they love their children has one. Every counseling office has one. Every police department, fire department, emergency services department, every shelter, every food bank. They all have one. There is one for parents who feel overwhelmed caring for their kids. There is one for every grown-up kid who feels overwhelmed caring for their aging parent. There is one for marriages and there is one for divorces and there is one for those who are single and there is one for those who are widowed. It turns out there is one everywhere you turn. Everywhere you turn there is a ladder.

There is a ladder in the busy little Greek town of Berea. In the spring of 1999, we led a trip called “In the Footsteps of Paul.” We traveled to Greece and Turkey. At Berea, one of the places Paul stopped in the Book of Acts, we gathered at a small memorial site. We read from Acts 17:11 that the good folks of Berea were of a noble character. When they heard the good news of the gospel, they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. In honor of those noble Bereans I asked our travel group if in their years of examining the Scriptures they had found a passage that was a favorite, a passage they turned to in times of trouble, a passage that symbolized their relationship to God. Folks took their turn holding their bibles and telling about how God so loved the world, and about the Lord who is our shepherd, and several said, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice.”

Then a woman came to the front with her bible. She opened it up to Genesis 28:15 She read the words we heard earlier today. “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...” She closed her bible and went back to her place in the group. She had been standing near a wall. When she got back to her place she reached toward the wall. I kept my eye on her. That woman was my mother. Her favorite bible passage was Genesis 28:15. As she reached toward the wall, I could swear she grabbed hold of an old ladder that had been left there. She held onto that ladder with all her might. My dad was in the early stages of a progressive disease. His illness was very difficult, but his illness was not the first time she had reached out for that ladder. Her brother drowned when she was five or six. Her mom died soon after that. Her father had a stroke and couldn’t care for her and her siblings so members of their close-knit church family each took one of the kids into their home. A family took my mom into their home and loved her and cared for her. My mom lost my older brother Richard after he had only been alive a few hours. And there she was, holding onto that ladder...again. She was holding onto that ladder like she always did. She was holding onto that ladder like her life depended on it. And she looked up. She looked way up, to the top rung, which was so high in the sky she could barely make it out. She leaned her head back to see that top rung and in a gentle whisper she said, “Still there, Lord?” I couldn’t hear what she heard, but it must have been sweet. A beautiful smile came over her face. I’m pretty sure she heard God speaking to her, from way up on that ladder. I’m pretty sure she heard her Lord say to her, “Still here, Clara. I’m still here. And I always will be.”