“This is the Place?”

July 23, 2017

Genesis 28:10-19, Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

How many of you have been to Mount Rushmore? It is nestled in a beautiful part of the Black Hills of South Dakota. The black hills is so beautiful right? You can tour the scenic cliffs nearby. You can climb up to the highest point in the United States that is east of the Rocky Mountains. There fantastic lakes that have cliffs lining them. I had a blast jumping off those cliffs into the lake below. You can go and see the buffalo at Custer state park. But the main reason people come to the black hills is Mount Rushmore. If you were like my family, we crammed into the family minivan and made the 13-hour or so drive to Rapid City, South Dakota. Then went to Mount Rushmore. Of course all of us were anticipating seeing the monument. I remember watching movies as a kid that had Mount Rushmore in it. They would show an aerial view and it looked so magnificent. We pulled into the parking lot and walked down the path toward the monument. I then had my first peak at Mount Rushmore. What a let down. I complained to my parents, we came all the way for this!!!? You could see it off in the distance but it was not that impressive. I have had this same experience with other monuments and popular attractions. I had the same reaction at Stonehenge.

So I wonder what Bethel is like today? The place where God came down and met Jacob. Many scholars associate the Biblical Bethel with the village of Beit El, which is 11 miles of Jerusalem. It is a disputed Israeli settlement in Palestinian territory. So the modern Bethel is in a very contested place. Can this really be the place that God came to Jacob? If we went there now, would we have that reaction like I did to Mount Rushmore?

Our passage continues on from last week’s scripture where Esau gave up his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of Stew. We missed the great story in between of Jacob and his mother Rebekah scheming. They were scheming for Jacob to receive his father’s blessing instead of Esau. While Esau was away hunting for his father’s possibly last meal, Rebekah covers Jacob in goatskin and some of Esau’s clothes. Since Isaac was nearly blind, the ruse worked. Jacob got the blessing. Esau comes back expecting a blessing and he does not get it. It was believed that a blessing released a power that could not be retracted. Isaac told him that he would always serve his brother and live by the sword. But one day he will free Jacob’s yoke from his neck. Understandably Esau now hated Jacob and vowed to kill him once he was done grieving for his father’s death. Rebekah found out about this and sent Jacob off to his uncle. Rebekah hopes that Jacob will only be gone a short time. One day she will send for him and he would come back. But that hope is in vain. He will never see his mother again.

So Jacob is now running for his life. While running away, he needed a place to stay for the night. It doesn’t say right away what this place was. Just some place that does not seem very inhabited. He took a stone and used it as a pillow. That was what struck me the most about this passage. I had never thought about this before. Who uses a stone as a pillow? Was this a usual practice in the ancient world? Did he not have some extra clothes with him that he could ball up into a more comfortable pillow? I am amazed that he got any sleep at all. You would have to be extremely tired to fall asleep using a rock as a pillow. It must have worked for Jacob. Here is is alone, vulnerable and in the middle of nowhere.

Jacob then had quite the dream. He dreamt there was a ladder set upon the earth with the top reaching all the way to heaven. The angels of God were going up and down the ladder. This is where the Lord meets him. In the middle of nowhere. In an unexpected place. God stood behind 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 your offspring; 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 in you and in your offspring. 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.”

Wow God, just Wow! You promise all of this great stuff to a lying, no good cheat. You have to be kidding. His name literally means heel. Our great God is going to give this promise to a complete scoundrel. At least he recognizes the holiness and profoundness of that moment. He took that stone he was using as a pillow and made a pillar. He called this place the house of God. Bethel. Which will become the name of many different organizations. Bethel Presbyterian Church. Beth-El synagogue. Even Bethel University, which was one of my college’s main rivals. They were a rather conservative Baptist college. We played them in football every year. I remember they were so strange to play against because they were so nice. One time I pancake blocked a guy. When the play was over he said, “Nice hit, God bless you!” I had no idea how to respond to that. That was my experience with Bethel.

Jacob recognized the holiness of the situation but the story takes a different turn. He makes a vow, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my Father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.” Here he goes again. What a great statement of faith. I sure hope we never use something like this for our affirmation of faith. He gives five conditions to God’s promise. God must stay with me, must protect me in my travels, must give me food, must provide clothing and must bring him back home in peace. He receives this divine promise but doesn’t really know what to do with it yet. Sure as long as everything goes well in my life, then yes I will agree.

In this story as in last week, Jacob is definitely not the hero. Sure he recognizes how holy a moment it was to meet God. But this story is not really about Jacob. This is a story about God. And the character of God. Sometimes this story is called Jacob’s ladder. That Jacob climbs the ladder to meet God. Not the case here at all. This should be called God’s ladder. Where God comes down to meet Jacob.

So why does God keep pursuing Jacob? Because he made a similar promise to Abraham and to Isaac. That their family will prosper. So no matter how scheming or deceitful this Jacob is going to be, God is going after him. That is the kind of God we have. That keeps going after us. No matter how wayward or blasphemous we can be.

Often people think that they need to go off and find God. Like go off to a nice retreat center in the woods. Go off and pray and then you will find God. Perhaps visit one of the great cathedrals like Notre Dame. There you might find God. Go to Jerusalem and there you might find God. But this story shows that we don’t need to find God. God comes and finds us. Often in rather ordinary and dull places. Where we are using stones for pillows. When we weren’t even giving God a second thought. I remember when I first began talking with the PNC for this church. Logan, West Virginia where in the world is that. We were in the hospital for the birth of our girls and while recovering our nurse was a church member of ours in Greensboro. She is from Barboursville originally. We were talking late one night as she worked nights and she was wondering where am I going to head next. I said well we are going to schedule a visit to this church in Logan West Virginia. And she says, LOGAN! She was shocked and awed. Brenda explained how Logan has a little bit of a reputation for being a rough town. I said I guess I’ll find out for myself.

Once I accepted the position, I told the church in Greensboro. The responses were very interesting. Why are you going to West Virginia? Where in the world is that? Oh, you should really read Hillbilly Elegy. Then the people that grew up in West Virginia came out of the woodwork. Oh I am from Fairmont, Oh, I am from Welch, Oh, I am from Charleston. It seemed like Greensboro was a community for West Virginia exiles. A Presbyterian chaplain from the local retirement community found out where I was going. She is originally from Parkersburg and she said, “Logan, why would you do that to yourself.” Of course not everybody had things like that to say. Many were quick to say that the hospitality was second to none. That people here take church seriously. Like anyplace, good and bad.

But for a lot of people it is like West Virginia is this exotic land. It has gotten a lot of press lately. But so much of the press is negative. So what am I doing here, I might ask? Probably a lot of people who live here ask that too. Which might be a question that Jacob asked when he laid down to sleep with that rock as a pillow. God will come to us in this place. Even here. Even now. It is up to us to see that promise. To have faith that it is true. Not to offer conditions to that promise like Jacob.

Now I am sure that not all of us are schemers like Jacob. But we all are sinners and have some character flaws after all. Maybe right now we don’t know what to do with the promise that God has for us. Or that it is scary that God will keep pursuing us no matter what we do. Someday we will get it. Eventually Jacob gets it. Hear these words from Genesis 32. “ O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, Return to your country and to your kindred and I will do you good. I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mother with the children. Yet you have said, I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.” See the change? There is no if then in this prayer. Because God you are faithful therefore I am trusting you now. What a profound change. This change is not of Jacob’s doing, but of God’s.

What kind of change will God make in us because of this promise? What will this continual pursuit do to us? What will God’s pursuit of Logan look like? Will we listen to the dream or dismiss it?

Here in this church, these walls are safe. You know everyone in here. You have been going to church together for a long time. This is where we come to worship and experience God. But generally we know what to expect in here. There will be liturgy, music and a sermon. It will not go over an hour. But when we go outside that is when we meet the unexpected. Jacob was fleeing the wrath of his brother. Tired enough to sleep with a rock as a pillow. He was in the middle of nowhere. That is when he was vulnerable. That is when God came to meet him. Even in that place. Let’s keep our hearts and minds open to where and when God might meet us. Amen.