

Let us listen to part of the story of the patriarch Jacob, whose name later would be “changed” to Israel. Jacob is fleeing the murderous wrath of his brother Esau. You may remember from Sunday School that Jacob previously had traded lentil soup for his elder brother’s birthright. More recently, at his mother Rebekah’s suggestion, Jacob had pretended to be his brother so that their father Isaac who had lost his sight gave Jacob his brother’s blessing as well. When our story begins, Rebekah has sent Jacob away toward the country of her own people to look for a suitable wife.

“Ch-ch-ch-changes: Jacob’s Pillow”

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Genesis 28:10-22

“Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 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. 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. 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; 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.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “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.””

This always has been one of my favorite stories to look at with my churches because I see parallels between the journey of Jacob and the interim journey.

Jacob stops at this “certain spot” not because he’s thrilled to be there or it is his intended destination, but because he has no choice: Verse 11 says the sun has set. Churches in the interim likewise usually aren’t all that excited about being where they are in the midst of transition.

Like Jacob, through a mix of their own actions and those of other players, they’ve been forced to leave the familiar and embark into an unknown future. They’re seeking someone to join their family and bring new life, but at this point they’ve only a vague sense of who that person might

be or where they might be found. Jacob is not a man looking for enlightenment- he's just an exhausted guy uncertain of his path in the dark.

He is resourceful- Jacob uses one of the stones of the place as his pillow- but by the same token he doesn't seem all that well equipped, and though ancient cultures from China to Egypt commonly used wood, ceramic, and, yes, stone, for headrests, it's hard to imagine he is all that comfortable there in an unfamiliar place with his head on a rock.

It is easy to imagine the questions and worries that are in his head. Will his past catch up to him? Is God's blessing really on him? What is ahead on this journey? These are familiar questions because we ask them not just for congregations but for ourselves as individuals when our lives are disrupted and we attempt a new start.

And so it comes as truly good news to Jacob, to churches, and to me and you that it is there in the dark, in the discomfort, that God draws close.

Jacob, vulnerable and feeling alone, receives a vision of ministering angels connecting him- him!- to the glory of heaven itself.

And Jacob does not only see, but hears: the God of his ancestors who stands beside him reminds him of having faithfully accompanied his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac, and says to him- him!- *"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."*

When we look back, especially in long-ago-founded congregations like Higganum Congregational Church and First Congregational Church of Haddam, we see God's presence and promise in action in the creation and building up of these covenant communities. But like Jacob remembering the legendary faith of his fathers, we may wonder if we are worthy or capable inheritors of our birthright.

Memory can become a burden, a barrier to encountering God in our own time. It's not the same, we lament. It will never be the same, we worry.

In the interim time, we are invited to rest, to be still. To be in our grief and anxiety, so that we too can be surprised by God just as our predecessors surely were on their own uncertain journeys, to hear like Jacob God's renewed promise.

We respond like Jacob. "What?! Here?!" In this in between when we want nothing more than a way out, through, or over? Here! We catch a glimpse of God's Realm, we sense God near at hand, we hear God's voice. And we exclaim with Jacob in Verse 16, *"Surely the Lord is in this place—and we did not know it!"* This place!

Now, it is good news, it is good news. But our first reaction, like Jacob's in the very next verse, may not be excitement or joy or enthusiasm, but "fear."

Because make no mistake: an up close and personal encounter with God is going to demand a response. It's going to mean some work. It's going to mean "Ch-ch-ch-anges" in our lives and our lives together. Ready or not.

Jacob wakes early and using his stone pillow builds a marker in that previously-unnamed place in the middle of nowhere: a place he names "Beth-el," the house of God. And there he makes his Covenant- not Abraham's or Isaac's but his own - with the Lord.

And it is a conditional Covenant.

Jacob says, "IF
God will be with me,
and keep me in this way that I go
and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear
and bring me 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 I receive I will surely give one tenth."

It's as far as he can go right then. And you know what? I love that Jacob gives himself an out. Because he stands in so well for most of us that way. We put conditional terms on our response to God too. We are realistic. We say, "I'll change, but only if..." Whether as individuals or as congregations we hope God can do it, we hope God can carry us through, we hope God can provide. But we aren't absolutely sure.

And my interpretation of this text is "That's ok." Because God doesn't show up for Jacob because Jacob is all that great, because Jacob has a clear plan and purpose and everything figured out. Hardly. God shows up because **God is great** and has plans Jacob can't even dream of yet.

So let us boldly commit... to the little bit we can do. Let us rest here in this in between, and see what vision God gives, listen for what promise God makes. Let us be willing to begin to think of starting to see ourselves not as fugitives on the run, but as potential covenant partners with God and inheritors of the promise.

Jacob in spite of his "iffy" start, will live to see every bit of what he dared to ask of God that morning. He will be changed by his time in between, more than he at first knows, and through him so will be the world.

We can rest and work and commit, friends and partners on this interim journey with all its changes, because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.