

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 28

How many of you find yourself forgetting things these days? I am much more hesitant to argue with someone about something that happened anymore, because my memory feels unreliable. I thought that is what happened, but I also thought I left that sweatshirt right here, and I know I put that tool where I would be able to find it, and it seems to have evaporated. And the problem with writing things down is that you have to remember that you wrote them down and where you wrote them down. And it is always interesting to see old pictures and memories of our kids at younger ages come up on Facebook, and I really have to work to remember sometimes, and if not for such digital artifacts I might forget certain times and events altogether.

Now despite our memory snafus, there are moments of joy or of trauma that get burned into our memory. Of the millions of moments in our lives, there is a select subset that we have distinct memories of. We remember the faces, the emotions, the smells. Certain moments get burned into our memory. Pivotal moments, transformational seasons. And there are moments that become important to you not to forget, not to lose the significance of over time.

This is a concern voiced repeatedly throughout the bible. The injunction to remember. Important moments, commitments, covenants. Remember God's promise. Remember where you have been and what God has done. Because the implication is that in remembering you will act accordingly.

In our Genesis reading, Jacob is on the move, living semi-nomadically as his ancestors did. We are told he is on his way back to Haran. In the prior verses Isaac instructs Jacob to find a wife from their people back in Mesopotamia rather than taking a wife from Canaan. And so he is on his way back to where Abraham and Sarah came from. And while he is used to moving about seasonally, Haran is in Mesopotamia, in the land of the great rivers, much more suitable to sedentary living, perhaps a risk that he might not come back. And in the Laban story, Jacob's attempt to get a wife takes him over fourteen years. And so, God reminds and renews for Jacob the promise he gave to Abraham, and burns it into his memory so that he does not forget to come back.

Jacob, no doubt, heard the stories of his grandfather, Abraham—stories about stars filling the sky, of promises of land and descendants, of their trek from Haran to Canaan, of grandma Sarah having Isaac very late in her years. He has heard the stories about past and these promises for the future around the campfire. He has been fervent in claiming his place in the family line having swindled the birthright of the firstborn from his brother Esau. But on his way back to Haran to find a wife for himself, he learns of it all in a new and powerful way.

He camps for the night. And he has a dream. He dreams Heaven and earth have been connected through a ladder. And the Lord has come down that ladder and is standing next to him and makes a promise to Jacob that sounds dramatically similar to the Lord's promise to his grandfather Abraham. Land, descendants as numerous as the sand, and the promise of God's companionship. "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."

The promise and presence of the Lord that Jacob had grown up hearing about now come alive for him in that place. A place often comes to be meaningful and special for us when it is tied to an experience, a story, and a feeling, an emotion. In the ancient world, gods were identified with certain places. This place is special because God is here. We here this language, this sense, in our passage. “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So, God shows up, makes promises to Jacob, and Jacob reciprocates. He marks the place, marks the moment, because of this significant revelation and promise that he now must remember and pass on, just as Abraham did. He marks it because he enters into this kind of renewed covenant with the Lord. The Lord made vows, now Jacob is reciprocating by making vows.

In the ancient world, if God reveals or manifest himself in a place, it is considered sacred, in the sense that God is most likely to be found or accessed there again. So temples in the ancient world, for example, are built on a site where God did something. And if another group comes along and takes over and wants to build their own temple, they build on top of the old temple site because of a sense of earned sanctity. So archeologists often have to decide what era they are interested in, because there are many layers of temples built over the ruins of the old. The point being is that this place becomes significant, and he marks the spot so that he can find his way back to this place, this house of God, this portal to heaven.

And while Bethel will come to be a worship site, will accrue over the centuries. It all begins with God showing up in a place, and a crude memorial being erected. So Jacob takes the stone he was sleeping on, and he stands it up. And this stone goes from being a crude pillow, and from being just another rock, to now representing the Lord, representing the story, representing the covenant, representing the relationship. On our cover is an image of standing stones, very similar to Jacob’s. It is a common practice in the ancient world. And this stone is more than a type of book mark, it comes to be identified with the deity. Jacob calls it the house of God. It is not a literal house, or a temple, but a place where God dwells, where God can be found, where one would journey back to.

Remember. Remember. Jacob will be a long time getting to this place. Next week we will read the Laban story. How Jacob the trickster meets his equal in Laban, how he works seven years for Rachael, but Laban sneaks in Leah, making Jacob work for seven more. I’m sure there were discouraging days in there, days where it might be hard to imagine getting back, hard to imagine the promise being realized. Or maybe he started to image other possibilities, a life in Mesopotamia rather than coming all the way back to here.

I sense the same is true in our spiritual journeys. We might start to lose our fervor, forget what put us on a particular path to start with. The emotional memory of God’s presence and help in the past might start to fade, just because life is busy and other things come along, and we face stresses and challenges and we get distracted or worn down. We lose our fervor, and we start to question how reliable our memory is. Did God really say that? Was it true, or was I just young and impressionable?

God seems to know this about us, knows this about Jacob. And so, God reveals himself to Jacob, and they form a covenant. “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,²¹ so that I

come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,²² 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.'"

So, every time he has bread to eat and clothing to wear, he is reminded that God is keeping his part of the deal. Every time we have bread to eat and clothing to wear, every time God is present with us, answers prayer, provides, we too might be reminded that God is attentive to his part, faithful to the covenants made along the way. And so, Jacob's part is to be faithful to the promise, to commit himself to playing his part in God's plans, to binding himself to God through a tithe, giving God one-tenth of all he amasses.

Now I know that remembering can be challenging, but where along the way has God shown up for you? Where did you experience God in a dramatic way? Where have you erected stones to remember, where did you make promises and commitments? And as life has gone on, and life gets busy and complicated, and we change and morph, have we remembered those places? Do we remember the commitments and the promises, the covenant between us and God?

Now, we do change over time. Our perceptions of God and the character of our relationship changes and deepens and that is good, I believe. We should be changing and deepening and seeing afresh. The way we see or relate to younger versions of ourselves, or old landscapes should change. But hopefully, not so much that we lose touch with God's promises, lose touch with the commitments made and the relationship established. And even though God may seem slow, or distant, every time we have bread to eat and clothes to wear, may we be reminded that God is faithful his part of the covenant. And may we be faithful also.

And because memory is not always reliable, we need reminders, to remind us of God's faithfulness, and to inspire and renew our own. We need reminders, even a stone stood on end to help us find our way back, so that our hearts do not forget what God has done.

Genesis 28

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

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 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!” ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ 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, ²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²² 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.”

Romans

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—

¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Future Glory

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.