

REFLECTION

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Genesis 28:16-17

Good morning. I'd like to share some thoughts with you about one of the oldest stories in the Bible: Genesis 28:16-17.

Here's how it goes:

Jacob, father of the 12 tribes of Israel, is running for his life from his brother Esau whom he has cheated.

In the wilderness he has a dream, a vision, of a ladder or staircase extending from the earth into the heavens. And there were angels.

He woke up said wow! "This is the house of God".

What struck me first about this passage is that it's like Jacob sees the Earth for the first time when he wakes. It makes the soil under his feet come alive.

But it was not just his vision that caught my eye. It was where he was coming from.

He was running scared, running from what he had done.

Imagine what Jacob must have felt – and we can because we know what it is to run away in fear. Perhaps literally, perhaps figuratively, we all run from our fears: our personal demons, strife within our immediate family and loved ones, inequality in our community, geopolitical upheaval, and catastrophe in the ecological support systems of this planet.

There's no doubt that we need help.

What can we learn from this passage to help us?

I'd like to share a few ideas on this, but I need to make two caveats.

First, you are about to hear scriptural interpretation from a scientist. That's perilous because a scientific reading of these stories is the wrong reading. I'll try to keep it in check.

Second, I've been reading these stories to Hazel recently in the Childrens Family Bible. So if my interpretation sounds fit for a 4-year old, you'll know why.

As we know from the story, Jacob was running because he had stolen a blessing that his father was going to give to his brother Esau.

The custom was to give the blessing – the land – to the eldest son. Primogeniture. A system of privilege. You are just born into it. Like the Koch Brothers inherited their vast wealth, and like I was born a white male in the United States of America in 1972.

What does it mean for Jacob to have done this? He colluded with his mother, Rebecca, and he was crafty about it. You could say he stole the blessing because he pretended to be his brother and tricked his father.

So he was not perfect. He was running from his past but he received God's blessing anyhow.

In West Virginia we can all understand Jacob's fear in one particular way as well: we're afraid about what the future holds. All we know for sure is that the West Virginia of the next 50 years will be very different from the last 50.

I'm truly afraid that, as tough as things are right now, we have not yet seen the darkest days in the coalfields of West Virginia. I think folks living there feel this too. Mines are closing, unemployment is high, and there are few other economic opportunities. And folks are worried about what's in their drinking water.

This is terrifying.

And we're all running from this fear. In our political races and in our personal response to economic injustice in Appalachia – we're all running from it in one way or another.

And this is where Jacob's vision has meaning to me.

Jacob's ladder is more about the Earth right here than heaven up there.

He wakes up awestruck by his vision. He looks around and says *this* place is the house of God. He's not saying, wow – I've got to get up there! He's saying *this* place is divine!

The story is about the Earth coming alive, not about the Earth providing a springboard to the next life in heaven.

And moreover the very notion of heaven as commonly portrayed now would have little meaning when Genesis was written. So really this story tells us more about the Earth here than heaven there.

I also think it's meaningful that it's when he is alone and afraid that he has his vision – a connection to the divine – that gives him hope.

I think there is something powerful in that idea.

Because I think we're there too in several ways, ready for a vision of our connection to the divine.

We see divinity in the children sent north to the United States by desperate and heartbroken parents.

We see divinity in all people as Israeli troops mass at the border and another generation of martyrs takes their position in the streets of Gaza.

We see divinity in Appalachia and are working for our renewal. And we see signs of progress.

Solar power grows every year in West Virginia – and I'm so happy that we are helping lead the way. This church is pioneering a new way for organizations to go solar in West Virginia. We're on schedule for our ribbon-cutting in late August. Way to go.

Maybe Jacob's ladder wasn't to heaven, it was to the sun. It was a powerstrip to the electrical outlet in the sky.

After all, we all know from all the pictures of a white-skinned blue-eyed Jesus that he usually had sunbeams around his head. That's solar power, people! I rest my case.

Kidding aside, the work of this church for clean energy is a beautiful thing. It's helping bring a positive future to Appalachia. And it's being noticed. For example, we just received an award from the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition for this project.

SPC in my life has made me more of a whole person. It helps join my scientific mind with my spiritual mind, and the solar project exemplifies this...we're using our hearts to ask why and heads to ask how. Both dimensions are fully engaged in this work.

For me Jacob's dream is about being blessed even though you don't deserve it, being blessed even though you run from your fears, and being shown the divinity of the Earth.

My hope is that we can see the enchantment of the Earth, humbled, weak-kneed before the world. And that we can use this to nourish us, because we're going to need it for the work ahead.

Amen.