

The Virtues of a Stone Pillow  
Genesis 28:10-18  
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Comfort – it's life's pursuit for many people, or at least for those who aren't simply trying to survive. We strive to feel comfortable in our homes, our beds, our cars; in our jobs, our roles as spouse or parent or child; in our relationships with family, friends, or God. The feeling of comfort, softness where we sit, or fruitfulness where we work, yes, the achievement of the feeling of comfort is often high on our list of priorities.

Comfort – What is it for you? Is it a nice leather sofa you can read a great novel on without falling asleep? Or maybe that you can fall asleep on it reading a great novel? A temperature in which you never need to wear either a sweater or shorts? Or is it that state of being where you know you are competent, that you probably won't look foolish doing something? Or maybe it is a certain income level so you don't have to worry that the money will run out before the month does? Or maybe a kind of assurance of your salvation, of your afterlife destination?

Probably, Jacob had none of those things on his mind as our story tonight unfolded in his life. I think mostly he was worried about just making it through to his next birthday, considering his elder brother Esau had vowed to kill him for tricking their father into giving Jacob the paternal blessing reserved for the older brother in a family. You will remember how Jacob fooled his half-blind father by

bringing him the food he loved while wearing animal skins on his arms so that Isaac might think he was his more hairy brother. And when Esau finds out what Jacob has done, he flies into a rage, and their mother must concoct a story that will get Jacob out of town, and so he goes away ostensibly to find a wife among acceptable people, and that is where we find him tonight.

It may be that it was in search of comfort that Jacob tricked his brother and father, so that he might be wealthy and blessed enough to live his life in a bigger tent with a two camel garage. But that is certainly not where he ended up. Instead, he's on the desert floor with a stone for a pillow, after a long day running for his life. And of course, in this humble state, an extraordinary thing happens. He has a dream in which God reveals to him a blessing far greater than what he could have imagined would come from his father. He probably thought his father's blessing would be worth something, he sure knew he wanted it over and against his brother, he may even have believed God had something to do with it, but he probably never imagined himself as the inheritor of a promise made to his grandfather Abraham, passed on to his father Isaac, and for all eternity attached to his own name, as we still today call our Creator the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Here's an interesting fact about Jacob's relationship with God: that to this point in his story, the only time Jacob says anything about God is when he lies about God to his father about why it took so little time for him, when his father thought he was Esau, why it took so little time for him to return with the game he desired for his

dinner. Jacob says, “Because the Lord your God granted me success.” “The Lord *your* God!” Now that’s rich. He can’t even acknowledge God as his own God, but only as the God of his father. That’s how close Jacob and God were then. But it won’t be long before they are wrestling all night long on the banks of the River Jabbock, and he will receive the name that remains attached to his descendants, Israel. And so what this means is that our story tonight is very, very significant in advancing the relationship between God and God’s people on many levels, and God chose to do it when Jacob was at his least comfortable.

It is not completely clear whether even Isaac believed that the blessing he passed on was the blessing he and Abraham received, that threefold blessing of land, children, and blessing, but it surely seems to be confirmed in Jacob’s dream, since God reaffirms to him what had been shared with his father and grandfather, beginning back in chapter 12 of Genesis. The elaborate nature of the actual conferring of the blessing given to the eldest son seems to suggest that the practice of this blessing was not simply Isaac’s idea to pass on what God had promised him, but rather a fairly customary farewell kind of a blessing, one that may have conferred on its recipient a kind of equality with the one giving it, a passing of the mantle, so to speak. And so it must have come as quite a shock for Jacob to hear echoed in his dream the story he must surely have heard in his youth, that God had chosen Abraham and his descendents for a very special purpose, to be the bearer of blessing to the world. If you wonder how the dots connect to you sitting here

tonight, you might want to go home and reread Paul's letter to the Galatians where he makes a pretty good case that the reason we are sitting here tonight is because of this very promise we remembering once again tonight, that we are the receivers of this same blessing, the spiritual descendants of Abraham and his family through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Yes, this story has everything to do with us on many levels.

So what did Jacob learn in his night of discomfort? Well, first he learned all about what I have just mentioned, about the gravity of his role in the whole story. But perhaps even more important is that he learned that God was real, and not just his family's imaginary friend. This experience seems to have truly awakened in him a recognition of the divine. After seeing God standing right next to him, even though it was a dream, "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!'" And I think we can take that to mean not only was God in that place he would rename Bethel, but that God was in his place, his space, in his life, in his future. This story is here to remind us not only of the time God revealed the promise to Jacob, but the time God revealed God's own self to Jacob, even though he had done nothing to deserve it, and even more to deserve a curse rather than a blessing. And as if that weren't enough, I think it is safe to say that Jacob also learned that there is an appropriate response when the God of the universe comes and visits you in a dream. And his response was to remember the place in which it happened with the raising of a stone, the very stone in fact he had

used for his pillow, and the marking of that stone with oil so that he and others would be able to pick it out among all the other stones, and give it its proper due. If that sounds a little like what we have been doing at ECF during Lent, with the raising of our Ebenezer, then you've been paying attention, and good for you, for you have done the final thing Jacob learned in the desert, that we must interpret, attach meaning and significance to, these experiences when God breaks into our lives, whether through dreams, or visions, or prophetic words from others, or signs or miracles, or just plain old, not to be mistaken intuition. Jacob didn't just shrug off what he dreamt. He made it his own, and sealed his commitment with his vow, and then proceeded to live it out the rest of his days.

So, if an ignorant desert tribesman can recognize God in his midst, formulate an appropriate response, and interpret the visitation in a meaningful way, surely we can too. We have the benefit of all his knowledge, all the insight of the Bible, all the history and tradition and theology of our ancestors in the faith, not to mention Twitter, Facebook, and good old fashioned email. Surely, we too can have life-changing experiences of God and do something with them. Right? But where do we begin? Well, I'd say it all begins with the stone pillow. You see, it was while Jacob's head lay on what can only be ironically called a pillow, that God revealed something to him in a dream. Perhaps it is that we learn the most when we are most uncomfortable. I know that I am more likely to fall asleep than read if I have my head on a soft pillow, no matter how engaging the material. So if I really want

to get through a book or an article, I'll sit at a desk or in a hard chair precisely because it is less comfortable and therefore harder to lose my focus. And maybe it is not only that we learn better, or experience something new more easily simply when we are uncomfortable, but maybe also when we are not striving for so much or more comfort in our lives, or working so hard to maintain the comfort we do have. That takes a lot of work, if you haven't noticed. To go through life trying to create and maintain your comfort zones can be exhausting, especially when others or the economy or the weather or whatever else it is won't cooperate. If only it were as simple as dreaming it up and building it. But there are those other factors, those hairy brothers named Esau, those unpredictable bosses, those pesky ups and downs in the market, our own insecurities and inadequacies. And maybe you've had the experience of feeling like you've actually put it all together, that you've finally got to that point you've imagined for yourself when it all comes tumbling down.

That's happened to me more than once, but a particularly challenging time came just before my first call in Minnesota. Flora and I had every intention of remaining in Pittsburgh, where I had gone to Seminary. There were, after all, 156 Presbyterian churches in Allegheny County alone. (They say Presbyterians in Western Pennsylvania are dense. Still not sure what they mean by that.) Even knowing how unpredictable a pastor's life can be, we bought a house and spent a very uncomfortable, dust-filled three years remodeling it in hopes of becoming

comfortable in it. We found we had the perfect neighbors, a great view of downtown Pittsburgh, and a mortgage of only \$315 a month, and so I spent a full year searching and interviewing for a pastorate I could drive to and maintain my newly created comfort zone. But alas, it was not to be. Wiser people intervened and helped me to see that not only was it likely futile to keep searching in Pittsburgh, but that I was likely doing both myself and God a disservice but looking in such a geographically limited area, so I reluctantly put my head on a stone pillow and widened my search, and it wasn't long before we ended up in Minnesota, and I can look back and say, like Jacob, that "Surely the Lord is in this place." But I was still putting the last coat of paint on the living room the week we left for the great white north. And let me tell you how excruciating it was to turn the key in the door of that house for the last time, and to wave a final goodbye to our neighbors, never having fully enjoyed the fruits of my labors. But had I not, I might not be here where God is also "in this place."

All of this talk about intentional discomfort is not to suggest that God never wants us to have a soft place to lay our heads at night. In a sense, Jesus came as the Son of Man who had no place to lay his head precisely so that we may have a place to lay ours. But it is to suggest that there is a difference between being comfortable and feeling secure that may make the difference in how willing we are to be uncomfortable from time to time and enjoy the benefits Jacob enjoyed. I've described comfortable. What is "secure?" Well, "secure" is not a new set of barbed

wire and an alarm system. Thieves will always find a way to break into your home. “Secure” is, however, a knowledge that God loves you no matter what, whether you have reached the level of success you imagined, whether you have been the parent or spouse you wanted to be, whether you have relapsed in whatever your addiction may be, or failed in whatever relationship has gone wrong. You see, none of those things will make you any less valuable in God’s sight, and if you need a Biblical example of that, look no further than the Jacob of tonight’s story who was a thief and a liar, and yet God chose him. “Secure” is that place of contentment Paul describes from jail in Philippians when he says, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little and what it is to have plenty.” “Secure” is what frees us to live less comfortably, and more on the edge, taking more risks, and loving more deeply.

This is the purpose of Lent, the purpose of fasting, in a nutshell, that when we break out of our routines, our comfort zones, and when we exchange our comfortable pillows for stone pillows, we are more ready and able to receive what God has to say to us. And not only to hear it, but to act upon it, as Jacob did when he turned that stone pillow on its end, made an altar of it, and proclaimed his vow to serve this God he’d finally just met. May God help us to feel secure, that we may freely make ourselves uncomfortable. Amen.