

**An Empty Building: a Pandemic Inuksuk**  
**A reflection for 19 July 2020 on Genesis 28: 10-19a**  
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Sometimes I change my mind between the time I choose which lectionary passages we will use from the selections for a particular Sunday and when I settle into writing a sermon. Sometimes all the scripture options speak to me in one way or another. That happened this week.

However, Matthew wrote a sermon right into his text and put it in Jesus' mouth as an explanation of the parable of the wheat and weeds. I could have talked to you about what contemporary biblical scholars think about that and connected it with our context today, but let's let it stand as is, connected by our harvest hymn toward the end of the service. On Sunday afternoon, we may talk about it together on Zoom.

But for this written reflection, let's look at the colourful narrative about Jacob. Much of this was inspired by words of others, filed away in my archives as I prepared another sermon on this text. Unfortunately, I didn't note my sources that week, so cannot credit them, as I usually do. As my hubby often says, ministers are like honey bees, collecting pollen from a lot of different flowers.

Do you remember a TV commercial from a few years ago in which a small child was preparing to run away from home? In the end, all he could fit into his suitcase was his teddy bear. We finally saw him walking down the street, lugging an enormous suitcase, too big for him, with the head and feet of the bear protruding from a barely closed suitcase. (Pun intended) I don't even recall what the commercial was plugging, I just remember the sweet image of the runaway little one.

There are very few heart-warming tales about run-away teenagers, though. Runaways are a familiar sight on the streets of our big cities. Some run away because of abuse at home; some because they want "freedom"; some because their parents won't accept a gay child, or a pregnant one; some because of bullying at school; some for other reasons. Without the appropriate support, many end up in trouble with the law, addicted to drugs and resorting to pan-handling or prostitution to feed their habit and survive. Some don't.

Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, was a runaway and he had good reason to run. The story of Jacob and Esau is a tale of "sibling rivalry" in the extreme! And parents often exacerbate the situation. Esau was his father's favourite and Jacob, his mother's. That's always a recipe for disaster. According to their mother, each had been in competition since their conception. Must have been a tough pregnancy!

Before today's story, Rebecca helped her favourite child win his father's blessing, by tricking the old man! This blessing for the eldest son was very important. It could not be retracted, even if it was bestowed in error. Jacob's twin Esau was furious—the "I'm going to kill you" kind of furious—and Jacob knew it.

So, with the help of both his parents, on an errand to go "wife hunting," Jacob takes off and spends the night in the wilderness, with a rock for a pillow! Jacob, who liked to hang around home near his mom, near the tents and the good food, rather than out doing the hard farm work with his brother Esau, ends up sleeping on a rock in the wilderness. No contour pillow made of memory-foam. No goose-down duvet or sleeping bag (it does get very cold in the desert at night). No balled up T-shirt on top of his hiking boots under his head. Just a rock! Perhaps for the first time in his life, he does not have the protection of his extended family and the servants in tents all around them. He was in a dangerous place all by himself!

And on this night he has a dream. It was not a nightmare of Esau catching up with him or of being eaten by wild animals, but a dream of angels and of good news from God. When he awakens he turns that rock into some kind of 'marker' or "Palestinian inuksuk" and names the place, Beth-el, which literally means "house of God."

So, he builds a stone structure that became a local landmark, much like what we know in Canada as the "Inuksuk"—or more properly, the "**Inunnguaq**," which is what the ones that resemble humans are more specifically called. I have a beautiful friendship circle made of them, which Stephen gave me, treasured for the inscription on it. Yet they are not meant to be decorations! Inuksuit (the plural form) can be found from Alaska to Greenland and can be navigational aids, or they can temporarily point to dangerous conditions or food stashes or serve various other purposes, such as religious. Some are erected seasonally. They were sometimes essential to human survival in that beautiful, but harsh, northern land.

Jacob's marker came to be used as a spiritual landmark, a reminder of his strange dream.

Do you remember the African-American Spiritual, "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"? That was a favourite children's song for Sunday School or Vacation Bible School or summer camp back when we were kids, at least where I grew up. However, the song takes a few liberties with the story! In his dream, Jacob doesn't climb. It's the angels that do the climbing, and God comes and stands beside him to give him a message. No wonder Jacob thought he had slept at the very gate of heaven.

Celtic spirituality talks about "thin" places, where heaven meets earth and where one experiences the Divine. Some folks think of Five Oaks as that kind of place, as I have mentioned to you before. In fact, we have a School of Celtic Consciousness at Five

Oaks with John Philip Newell, usually in July, which won't be happening this year because of COVID19.

In THIS biblical story, for Jacob, Bethel was the place where heaven and earth connected, the place where God came to him. In his dream, the birthright that his father was tricked into blessing him with, that he would become father to a great nation, was re-affirmed despite his life of jealousy and deceit. Like the promise given to his grandfather Abraham, this promise to Jacob was also given before he had any children.

At the end of the day, this story, like all biblical stories, is part of our faith story! So let's make it ours by asking, "Where is our Bethel?"

Where is our Beth-el? Is it the building of mortar and bricks in which we are not worshipping during this pandemic? Is it our wider community? Is it where-ever we realize that God is with us, here and now and not in some past or future time or place?

There is a statement often used in teaching ministry students in CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, that goes something like, "We forget that God is already there." It is a reminder that when we go to visit someone in the hospital, thinking we are bringing God to them, we forget that God is already there in the bed with them.

Likewise, when we light the Christ candle in worship or a meeting, we do not invite God into our worship space. It's not a séance! God is already here. We are reminding **ourselves** of that when we light the candle.

Jacob's experience on waking from his dream is a similar moment, when he says, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!'

The Very Rev. Stan MacKay, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation with whom I had the privilege of working at a number of stewardship and justice events across the country, also served the United Church as Moderator from 1992 to 1994. One of the things Stan used to say is that the "Holy Land" is not that place "over there" where Jesus used to live, but this place, this land, where we live and move and have our being. This is a place blessed by Creator.

**Wherever you are sheltering in place, right now, is holy land.**

And God's presence in our lives is not just when we "have the time" or when it's "convenient" to pay attention and acknowledge it. It's not something we can get away from. As our United Church "A New Creed" says, "We are not alone." Ever.

So, another question for us in this story about run-away Jacob is: What are we trying to run away from and why? This pandemic time of sheltering in place is a really good time to ponder that question, because there are not the usual obligations and activities that

sometimes have us frenetically busy, which is also a way of running away from who we are and who we are called to be.

The promise to young Jacob is twofold: to be blessed and TO BE A BLESSING. He had already been blessed by fooling his blind old father, getting his brother's birthright. But now he is blessed by God with a promise that he would be father of a great nation. Was he running away from that or toward it? Turns out the story goes on to reveal he is running toward it. In a way, this resonates with what Rev. Harold was saying last week about the Spirit of Freedom, a freedom FOR, rather than FROM.

Are we running toward our future? And what is our hoped-for future, toward which we might run? An intentional transitional ministry time, such as we are in, is a time to ask questions like that. Something to reflect on this week: how are we running toward God's call to us at EPUC, God's call to make a difference, to BE a blessing? It is a personal question, as well as a collective question for us as a community of faith.

Jacob was a downright scoundrel, a man from a highly dysfunctional family who became the ancestor of a great nation, even though he was a liar and a cheat. Let none of us say that we are "not good enough" to be a blessing to others.

And may the building we are NOT in, and **we who long to worship there**, be a sign, an inuksuk, to God's presence in our lives and in this holy place of Burlington. May others look at our church building, **and us**, and say "surely God is in this place and with these people." May it be so.