

Angels Up and Down

^{NRS} Gen 28:10 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.

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But sometimes, especially when we're young, it just seems like things might just go great forever. That's how it was for Jacob. Jacob was a golden boy. You know the kind? He was the kind of kid for whom everything came easy. He was strong, he was athletic, he was good looking. He sailed through school without really working at it. He was never the last kid picked for the team. And more than anything he was smart- and not just book smart but emotionally smart. He knew how to read people. He knew how to get just what he wanted. Only sometimes, well all of the time really- he didn't actually know what it was that he wanted. And this combination- the ability to get pretty much whatever you want, but not really knowing what you really want- this can be a problem.

He reminds me of Captain Jack Sparrow from the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. Jack's this charismatic pirate with a magic compass that is the most amazing compass in the world- it tells him the exact direction to travel in to get his true heart's desire. The problem with Jack? Every time he looks at the compass, the needle is going all over the place. And there's nothing wrong with the compass- the problem is with Jack. He doesn't know what he truly wants, not down deep, anyway. So you have this amazing, great guy, with the tools that could lead him anywhere in the world- but the problem is that inside, he really has no idea where to go.

And this is the problem with Jacob, I think. He had the gifts and skills to do pretty much whatever he wanted in life. The world is his oyster. But, he doesn't really have any sense of purpose. And without this, he gets into scrape after another.

The first time this happened, he was just hanging out, bored one day. And he saw his brother Esau working in the fields. His brother Esau- well he was a big guy, a big ol' hairy guy, who...well, let's just say he wasn't exactly the sharpest plow in the field. And Jacob saw him coming a mile away. Jacob cooked up a mess of Esau's favorite food, and I imagine him maybe fanning the smell of it out across the good earth until you could hear Esau's stomach growling a mile away.

Finally Esau runs up: "Oh, Jacob, I'm so hungry!"

Jacob: "I bet you are. But...I'm not sure it's just ready yet."

"I'm going to die here. Come on, Jacob!"

"Well," says Jacob. "Ok...I can speed this up, but on one condition. Why don't you give me your birthright in exchange? So after this, when people ask who was born first- we'll just say my name instead of yours."

“I’m starving to death here,” said Esau. “Who cares about that?”

And, of course it does seem like a small thing- except with the birthright goes privileges, and ultimately, if it’s paired with the father’s blessing, the inheritance as well.

And of course that’s exactly what ended up happening. A few years later, when Isaac was growing old and blind, his wife Rebekah, who always liked Jacob best, hatched a plan to help her fair haired star child. I mean it wasn’t right that everything should go to Esau when Jacob was so clever. And so when Esau was out in the field, Rebekah helps Jacob get dressed in his brother’s clothes and even puts animal skins on his arms so he would feel like and smell like his brother. And, on his death bed, Isaac lays hands on Jacob thinking he’s Esau, and he gives him his blessing, which means he gives him everything.

Well, as smart as he was, I’m thinking Jacob hadn’t really thought through this all that well, because he should have known his brother wasn’t going to stay out hunting forever. And just after Jacob sneaks out of Isaac’s room with the blessing, Esau goes in with meat for his father. And poor blind Isaac, confused, says, “Who is this? And Esau says, “It’s Esau.” “Well then who was that I gave the blessing to,” Isaac wants to know. And it’s so tragic- Esau realizes his blessing has been taken, but asks if his dad can’t just give him a blessing, too. Can’t he just bless both of them? But, this just isn’t how it works. In that day a father had to pick one son, and once you picked, you couldn’t go back on your word.

So there’s Jacob in the hallway, tears running down his face he’s laughing so hard, having the time of his life. But then out comes Esau. Only he isn’t laughing. He’s enraged. In fact he goes after his brother with every intent to kill him. And Jacob, ever

the emotionally intelligent, senses his joke has gotten out of hand, and runs away as fast as his snarky little legs can carry him.

And this is where we find him this morning. On the run. Frightened. Alone. Starving, ironically; probably willing to sell that birthright right back to Esau, just to get him off his back. But Esau was after him, and the only thing for Jacob to do was to get out of Dodge. But to me, it's not where he's leaving that's interesting- it's where he's going. In the first line of the text this morning we find out Jacob leaves his family at Beer-sheba to head towards Haran. And the way the text puts this, it's like Jacob leaves Tualatin to find shelter in Sherwood, Tigard, or Wilsonville. But Haran isn't exactly just around the corner from Beer-sheba. It's not even in the same country. Does Haran ring a bell with anyone this morning? Does it sound familiar at all? Yeah, Haran is the town Abraham was living in when God called him to leave everything behind and go to a new land where he would be blessed and be a blessing. Now a lot of people get ideas like this, I think- but the crazy thing is that Abraham and Sarah actually do it. And they even make it- it's a journey of 6 months on foot if you're lucky, traversing ridiculous mountain ranges, having to find food all the time, and dealing with bandits on the highways. And he and Sarah weren't Spring chickens either, they were about 75 at this point.

So Jacob, now responsible for Abraham and Sarah's legacy, having set his entire family against him, he finds himself for the first time in his life, not just stalling- but heading backwards. He's heading back towards Haran- back to where everything started. He slides backwards. Backwards in time and geography- like he's erasing all that

incredibly hard and painful work his grandfather had done to get them out of there in the first place.

Sometimes the journey we're on doesn't always lead in a straight path. Sometimes even when things have been going great- life can turn on you, and you can wind up a little lost, wondering how the heck did I get in this spot.

Jack Hitt is a writer who grew up in North Carolina. I heard him interviewed recently. His dad came from hard scrabble rural poverty, and his mother was a southern belle from Charleston- it was like two different kinds of families. Jack remembers his father telling him how hard he worked to create a family that was respectable and better than the one he grew up in.

When Jack was 11, he committed what he calls the worst act of his life. He and a couple of friends created a kind of club one summer in an overgrown part of town nobody much bothered with. They built a kind of makeshift clubhouse and all, and one day, these bright kids, these golden boys with the world as their oyster, they decided to mark their territory. One boy drew a picture of a naked woman on one of the walls. Another boy carved his name into a tree with the name of the girl he was in love with- this, incidentally is how they got caught, using his name like that. And Jack. Well, Jack, the writer, took some paint and on one of the walls he wrote down every bad word he could think of.

Well, someone had seen the boys milling around that place and called the police. The police came, and after a tiny amount of detective work picked the boys up. They

took Jack home in a marked car, and escorted him up to the door and left him with his father, whom they had notified and who was home early from work.

Jack remembers his father calling him into his study. And after several uncomfortable moments his father said, "I understand you painted some words on a wall." And Jack just burst into tears. His father never cursed and was very strict. He asked Jack what were the words he painted. And, the young man choked out H-E-double hockey sticks. His father looked down. "Anything else?" He asked. And Jack was thinking, well yeah, that was just the warm up. Jack said he painted other words but couldn't say them- he just couldn't say them out loud. And father said, "Well tell me what they started with." And Jack realized his father wasn't going to let him out of it. So he coughed up the letter 'S'. His father's eyes blazed, he bowed his head. "Anything else?" And Jack was bawling at this point. There was only one word left. And yeah, he thought, I painted it. "F" he said. "F" The mighty 'F'. Jack's father, actually thunderstruck just sat there in stunned silence.

This is what he finally said, "Son, I've worked all my life to make sure that when you and your sisters or your brother, when you walk down the street people say, 'There goes a Hitt. They're good people.' I don't think anything that anyone in this family has done has damaged that reputation more than what you've done. That is your punishment."

And Jack said he wanted his father to spank him. He wanted some kind of explosion so they could just get it all out. But his father wouldn't. And a couple of months later Jack's father actually died, and this was really his last memory of his dad.

And I think because of the death and because of how young he was, it's fair to say that what he carried around with him for years after this was the sense of the damage he had done to his family- how his father had worked so hard to create a better life for them, and how, with just one bad day, and a little bit of pain, how he had taken the whole family backwards with him.

Now what Jack does figuratively, Jacob does literally. Jacob actually does go back to Haran. He physically erases all of the progress his family had made. Talk about going backwards. And this is why it is so strange to me what happens to him in the text this morning. I mean this has to be the lowest point in not only Jacob's story, but in the story of Abraham's family up to this point. It looks like everything everyone had worked for was coming unraveled. But did you hear what happens in this place? Jacob with a rock for his pillow somehow manages to get some sleep. And he dreams. And in his dream, his vision really, he encounters God.

Jacob actually encounters God in this vision- in spite of the terrible direction he's headed. Jacob, down and out, Jacob backsliding his way all the way to Haran- Jacob actually encounters the Holy One in that place. And the Holy One isn't screaming at him- telling what a terrible person he is. God speaks to the boy, reminding him of the promise- the promise given to Abraham his grandfather, and passed on to his father Isaac, and the one he now carried- the promise that his ancestors would be like dust, and the land upon which he lay would be his, and, maybe most importantly of all, that wherever he went- backwards or forwards, God would be with him.

And there's that ladder and those angels. I've never really known what to make of this vision, and I'm not sure I do now either. But this is what it means to me at this point. The angels going up the ladder, the angels ascending- these are for those great times when we're making progress in life, when we're actually doing good things, and life is going well. We have the angels ascending in front of us, showing us ever higher and higher pathways. But the angels going back down the ladder- well, these angels are for us when things aren't going so well, when we aren't quite as proud of the direction we're heading, when we actually seem to be not just going nowhere fast- but when it feels like we're actually losing ground. I think the meaning of this vision is that there are angels for us even then- maybe especially then. There are angels for us when we're up, and angels for us when we're down.

And the thing I love most about this story is this. If this were an after school special, if this were some kind of feel good movie- we know how it would end. Jacob would wake up, realize God had spoken with him- and he would go back home and use his golden tongue to smooth everything over. And he would say he was sorry and everyone would live happily ever after- disaster averted. We'd have a happy ending. But we don't get a happy ending here- we get something better- we get a good ending. Because even though Jacob wakes up and realizes God really was present with him- even this doesn't magically fix everything. Even knowing God's presence and hearing God's promise to him- Jacob *keeps on walking in the wrong direction*- and he walks in this wrong direction all the way back to Haran. And Jacob being Jacob, after finding two wives he managed to cheat his brand new father-in-law out of a fortune and makes him angry enough to hunt him down like a dog, just like he did with brother Esau. But even

in this- even after Jacob makes a bad situation worse- even this isn't enough to make God turn up his nose. No, even in his lostness- even there God dwells with Jacob.

Jack Hitt carried this terrible, if slightly overwrought, sense that he had destroyed his family's good name. Then, years later, at a little family reunion, he remembered staying up late, late, late with his siblings one night. All the spouses had gone to bed. And he and his brother and sisters were talking about their father- something they had never done before. And it all just came spilling out of him. All this shame he had over what he felt like was *the* black mark he had committed against the family. And he was crying, and it was this big moment. But all around him he saw his sisters and his brother smiling- laughing even. At first he was angry. This wasn't funny. A part of him believed his father had died because of what he had done.

But then, one by one each of them told Jack of something they had done in their day that had brought them into their father's study, and how he had sat down and had exactly the same conversation with each of them- word for word. His sister, for instance, said when she was in Atlanta one time she was arrested for shoplifting, and their father had to fly all the way from North Carolina to Georgia just to bail her out and bring her back home, and how she got the speech not just in the study but on the plane ride back home. And the way Jack related all this- you could hear in his voice that it was like this enormous weight being lifted from off his shoulders.

And I don't think it was just because he found out that his siblings were just as nefarious as he was- I think it was because he realized that other people, people he cared about and looked up to- they had known the same kind of lostness and darkness he had

known, and they had all found a way to laugh again, to breathe again...to live again. And he felt this relief because now he knew his father could give a speech like this, and still fly all the way to Atlanta, or anywhere else, and still bring his children home and call them by name.

Beloved, hear the words of the Lord: Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Amen.