

**July 17, 2011: SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE**

**Genesis 28:10-19a; Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 139:1-2, 23-24**

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When Rick and I were moving out here, we were astonished at the number of people in the Midwest who knew about Estacada and even Springwater. It wasn't long before we began to think this was one of those places sometimes referred to as a "thin place"—where heaven and earth seem closer together.

"Thin place" is certainly going on with Jacob today. Literally, of course, because his encounter with the Divine happened in that vulnerable, thin place of sleep. But people who heard his story in ancient times would have caught the architectural clue of the ramp or stairway of his dream. That was ziggurat or temple architecture, a place where people *expected* heavenly messengers coming and going between heaven and earth. Jacob was at a figurative thin place as well, what with being on a journey to escape his brother's murderous anger. But who knew that being on the lam brought out so much traffic between heaven and earth? Theologically, the point being that heaven's promises impinge and become "reality" which is discernible to humans. This is good news for Jacob, whose possibilities have shrunk from slim to nil, despite stealing the promised birthright from his brother. Or maybe because of that.

You remember the family promise, that stolen birthright, don't you? God has been intruding in this family for a couple of generations, always with a redefinition, at least of everything of importance. The promise God makes to Jacob today is the standard promise—place, posterity, presence. Too bad this promise always comes as a mixed bag. What about place? For a bunch of wandering nomads, bouncing from one watering hole to the next, generations of possessing only Sarah's grave (Jacob's grandmother) in the place they expect someday to call "home." Or posterity? Three generations of childless women, maneuvering and manipulating to get children of promise, and then either Dad himself or the other kids try to kill them off. And now presence--! You've got to wonder. This confrontation in the middle of the night is literally presence, but nothing compared to the intimate "presence" of Jacob's next nocturnal encounter with this promising God. For today, the promise and its intrusion save Jacob, at least momentarily, from his self-absorption.

The promise is Jacob's birthright. This is the promise for which he has been fighting his entire life, and for which he will someday wrestle the Almighty. It's the promise given his mother before he was born, but never mind that. For now, he hears that the promise is for him and his posterity. They are being blessed in order to be a blessing to others.

But where is the story about Springwater? After all, it's our birthday. I read some of our story in the historic session minute books, and there is plenty of story there! I read about pastors who came and went frequently, a few coming back more than once, some staying less than a year. Usually the new pastor was the impetus for reorganization, but then he would leave and things would revert to the way they'd been. One constant was concern for finances, the congregation cycling on and off denominational Home Mission support. It often took a year or even two to accomplish a project, with repairs only taking place because the pastor said conditions were unsafe. I only read the first fifty years, but things haven't changed much. For

instance, our worship attendance has been stable for our first 122 years, for instance, we still love Sunday School, we still make sure to dedicate something to support mission, both foreign and domestic. It's our way of being a blessing to others.

It's a nice story, but what is the promise implicit in our story? After all, God coming in promise is the point of story. As it was for Jacob, I read a promise of place. We belong, our place is here. Like Jacob, there is a promise of posterity. After all, we are the posterity of those brave folks who convened 122 years ago. The VBS kids whose photos are on the wall are *our* posterity. More than an investment, they are God's promise of a future in this place. But there is more. The heart of God's promise to Jacob is, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." It is the promise of presence. Of all the blessings implicit in "place" and "posterity," the blessing of God's own presence is most precious. We are blessed, as Jacob was blessed, for the sake of the well-being of others. As the promise was to Jacob, so it is to us: "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Our response, as was Jacob's, can only be, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

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