

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
***Being Found in the Thin Places***  
**Genesis 28:10-19**  
**by Missy Harris**  
**July 23, 2017**

More often than not, I don't remember my dreams. But there is a recurring one that is always a tipoff to me that I'm anxious or stressed or nervous about something – even if I don't know it yet. This dream is always a clue that I need to pay attention.

There I am in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, sitting on the sideline of the basketball court. The game has started. The coach has given me the sign to get ready to go into the game. I'm ready. I was born ready. My heart is pounding. I'm drying off my sweaty hands and taking a deep breath.

I bend down to make sure my shoestrings are tied, and I suddenly notice that my shoes are barely clinging to my feet. I have no shoestrings. Complete and utter terror sets in. I know that I can't run in a basketball game without shoestrings. I look down the bench. No one else has any idea what is happening.

My coach glances over at me and nods her head. I slowly hold up my finger and say wait a minute. Then I step behind the row of chairs where we are sitting on the

sidelines. (And anyone who has played basketball knows, you don't tell your coach to wait just a minute when she's just given you the nod to get yourself in the game. But that's exactly what I find myself doing.)

And for what seems like an eternity I am moving in slow motion. I feel like I am trying to run through a mixture of gravy and jell-o. I am trying to get to my shoestrings, which happen to be at the very top of the bleachers behind us. I make my way excruciatingly slowly through the crowd, around and over and through people. There is no clear path – no open aisle to walk through – a nightmare for the fire marshall – but that's somebody else's dream. Everything is still moving in super slow, gravy/jell-o like motion. My heart is still pounding. If this were a cartoon you would see a heart-like shape trying to escape from my chest.

I keep looking back at the bench. The game is still going. My coach is standing there looking up at me, impatiently motioning for me to get back down to the court. My words are heavy and stuck in my throat. I turn and keep trying to make my way to my shoestrings.

And then, I wake up - my heart still pounding, sweating and sometimes a little disoriented, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief when I realize I'm actually in

my bed, not in a gymnasium, in front of 200-300 people trying to get my shoestrings so I can go into the game.

In our text tonight, we encounter Jacob at the scene of a dream.

When I go back to any of these early narrative stories in scripture, I am struck by how very few (if any) of the characters we meet in these stories are models for ethical or moral behavior. Think about it for a minute: there is murder, polygamy, rape, deceit, lying, cheating, slavery, mothers plotting with their children against each other, parents choosing favorites – the list could go on and on.

This text, the *Bible*, which is used by so many as a primary source for upholding *traditional family values* really doesn't offer us too many examples of folks I want to look to for advice or instruction about how to be in relationship with my beloveds.

But, what stops me in my tracks every time is that there is plenty of room for every single one of us in this story – maybe more than we would like to admit. The story of Jacob is a story that we have all at least observed, but most likely have lived

through in one way or another during our lifetimes – just with different characters and different circumstances.

Good – or not so good – old Jacob. His family had a long and complicated history, as most of our families do. I asked Kim to give us a little bit of the backstory to our text tonight. Jacob and Esau were twins, and Jacob had been chasing after Esau from the moment of their birth, arriving in this world grasping at Esau's heel. Spending his life trying to be Esau, trying to get what belonged to Esau.

Fast-forward a few years, when they were older, Esau actually sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils and some bread when he was hungry (I feel like there is way more to this story than we know). As you heard Kim share with the kids, Jacob and his mother Rebekah later conspired for Jacob to steal their father Isaac's blessing, which was meant for his older brother Esau. There are many more details of Jacob's family history (past, present and future), that we don't have time to name, that are fraught with a good deal more deception and trickery.

And, y'all, this is family dysfunction at its best – or worst – depending on who you find yourself identifying with in the story at this particular moment: the blind and deaf father blessing the one he thinks is his oldest son, the scheming mother and

youngest son, the duped older brother, or maybe the one watching from afar, with a heavy, aching heart trying to pull a tiny thread of good sense and larger meaning out of the mess of it all.

When I look at our story tonight, I really want not to like Jacob. We've been given plenty of reasons not to like him. But if we're honest, I wonder if we have more in common with him than we would like to admit.

Jacob, with the aid of his mother Rebekah, had been able to control a lot in his life. He had been able to manage his life in a way that made sense to him, made him comfortable, and, for the most part, got him exactly what he wanted. He stole from his brother. He lied to his father. He looked after himself above all else. He acted like an entitled jerk, and there was not much in his life up to this point that seemed to inspire him to act in any other way.

But Jacob hit a wall. He crossed the line when he stole Esau's blessing from their father, Isaac. What he once thought he could manage and manipulate, suddenly took on a life of its own and began to spin out of control. He took off in a hurry when his mother Rebekah warned him that his brother Esau wanted to kill him.

So we find Jacob tonight, on the run, fleeing his home, his mother, father and brother – everyone and everything that was known and familiar to him. Jacob found himself in a terrible situation that resulted from his own decisions and choices. I like to imagine that he probably felt like he was running through a thick cloud of gravy/jell-o.

He was on his way to be with his mother's family in Haran, to seek a wife. The family drama stopped briefly when Jacob came to a certain place and night fell around him. He found a stone, placed it under his head for a pillow and lay down to go to sleep. As Jacob fell asleep, he entered into one of those thin or liminal places, not here or there – in between, on the threshold. He is not in control. He's alone, and he's asleep.

In some ways, it's an anticlimactic place to land. But it's significant. Walter Brueggeman reminds us:

“We require seasons of rest and, therefore, of vulnerability. Our control flags. We become open to stirrings that we do not initiate. Such stirrings come to us in the night unbidden. Dreams address us. They invite us beyond our initiative-taking management.

The ancient world and the biblical tradition knew about dreams. The ancients understood that the unbidden communication in the night opens sleepers to a world different from the one they manage during the day. The ancients dared to imagine . . . that this unbidden communication is one venue in which the holy purposes of God, perplexing and unreasonable as they might be, come to us. They knew too that this communication is not obvious. It requires interpretation.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the place where Jacob encountered God, where he acknowledged God’s presence – maybe somewhat half-heartedly, but he acknowledged it nonetheless. God had been with Jacob all along and promised to continue to be with him.

Nowhere did God say to Jacob, “All that stuff you did, forget about it. It’s all water under the bridge.” The encounter with God in his dream was not a magical turning point for Jacob. He didn’t come away from this encounter with God in state of perfection, destined to make all the right choices from that point forward. Jacob still scammed and lied and cheated.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggeman, Walter, “The Power of Dreams in the Bible,” from *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2005, p. 28-31.

What God promised Jacob was not perfection. Perfection requires a great deal of control to pull off. It's exhausting. What God promised was presence. Presence is messy. Presence doesn't control. God promised to be with Jacob. That is all. That is enough.

There has been a great deal of interpretation around Jacob's dream of the ladder extending between heaven and earth, a connection upon which angels were ascending and descending, with God offering a promise of blessing and continual presence to Jacob and to all of his offspring, and we could spend days talking about the range of interpretations – from God's preferential choice of a particular group of people to whether Jacob's questionable behavior made him less deserving of such a gift and promise to whether this dream speaks to moral relativism to the ways that such particular promises from God have been used to disempower and oppress other people for thousands of years. I have spent days looking at all of those.

But Brueggeman kept drawing me back to a word for us today from this text:

We like Jacob, are so very good at managing the work of the daytime. We've figured out how to pay the bills, connect with the systems that we need, cover for

our failures and insecurities, make it look like we've got it all figured out. We, like Jacob, have learned to manage and manipulate. But, deep down we know that ultimately this is not what our lives are really meant to be about.

The part of the story that takes us out of the seemingly well-managed, controlled daytime work that we engage in – those are the parts that engage us in the night, in our sometimes desperate efforts to find our way to restful sleep – the parts that engage us in the night are the ones that we most need to hear, that we most need to listen to, that we most need to turn our hearts and minds and bodies toward.<sup>2</sup>

Brueggeman goes on to say, “And what preoccupies me, not only personally but in terms of the church in the United States, is that my kind of established church has got the daytime all figured out. And it's very seductive to belong to a technological culture and be a part of the white upper or middle class where you can program it all out. Now what the church in the United States is having to ask is, what about those undercurrents that remind us that all of this is really phony and brutal and you can't live your life in terms of those things?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggeman, Walter, from an interview with Bill Moyers, *God Wrestling*, December 8, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The Jacob questions are our questions. This text finds us, just like Jacob, in an in between, not here or there, liminal kind of space, some of which has been of our own making, and some of which we have inherited from those who came before us. We all carry our family history within us, AND we carry the ability to live into a different way of being.

The nighttime undercurrents swirling around us remind us what is phony and brutal in our lives. The nighttime undercurrents also remind us that we have the capacity to step up, to own our own complicity in the brutality and phoniness, and do our damndest to live into a different way of being.

We have not figured out how to address or change or make reparations for, and in some cases even acknowledge, that there are fundamental problems with the way our lives have been ordered and how we continue to order our lives. We have to find ways to reorder our lives – to turn our hearts, minds and bodies toward a different kind of dream, to let go of the benefits of systems that help us and harm others; to be honest about our prejudices and racism and biases; to acknowledge our privilege and complicity; to let go of those daytime habits of management and manipulation that lull us into believing that we are in control.

I love the line from Leonard Cohen's song *Come Healing* that we've sung on a couple of occasions here at Circle of Mercy – "Behold the gates of mercy, in arbitrary space. And none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace." But it doesn't end there. The song continues, "O solitude of longing, where love has been confined, come healing of the body, come healing of the mind."

What Cohen get so right here is that none of us deserve the cruelty or the grace, but that we have to keep working to bring love outside the walls of solitary longing. Only when love breaks through those walls, will healing come to us.

We wait and expect and trust that healing is on its way. I don't think I could stand here week after week if I didn't live in this kind of hope and anticipation. And I, like Jacob, continue to be caught between what I can and cannot control, what I am willing and unwilling to let go of or change.

I know I need to keep paying attention to Jacob's dream – the dream that includes a ladder or stairway where holy messengers keep walking alongside us toward mercy and keep urging us to share that mercy in abundance, in an endless exchange. God was with Jacob. God is with us. God is with all of creation.

We will know that we are living a little closer to this dream when:

- Trailers filled with trafficked human beings are no longer found in the parking lot of a Walmart in San Antonio, Texas in 100+ degree weather.
- Black and brown bodies are treated with dignity and respect and are not shot dead because of the color of their skin.
- Every man, woman and child has enough to eat – with baskets full of food left over, pointing to the abundance that has been there all along.
- The health of the environment is treated with as much urgency as the threat of terrorism and receives as many resources as our military and prison industrial complexes.
- A trans-person of color can walk down the street of Hot Springs during a festival grounded in peace and justice and mercy without being intimidated by a white man driving back and forth up the street with a giant confederate flag attached to the back of his truck.

We are not there yet, but the dream is already being made known to us in the merciful messengers that come our way:

- When we gather and bear witness to the ways we see God's presence throughout the living of our days, week in and week out.

- When we collect our tears – both joyful and heartbreaking – and offer them to the Holy One in this community each week.
- When our children turn to us and say, the world should not be this way. How can this be? We will change this.
- When Joyce and others gather with the group of Latina women at church of the Holy Spirit in Madison County every week, for food, conversation, support – sometimes in the presence of perceived enemies.
- When we find ourselves in a Jacob-kind-of-way, desperate and broken by what we think we know and manage so very well, only to be met with and overwhelmed by, in the best kind of way, something so merciful and beautiful that we know we don't deserve, and that we have no idea how to receive without, at the same time, weeping with gratitude and laughing at the absurdity of it all.

I know that as long as we are living in this in-between space, until this mercy dream is fully realized, in the times when I forget to live out of the hope that sustains me, I'll probably keep dreaming about basketball. I'm not going to go out and buy a bunch of extra shoestrings, but I am going to do my best to pay closer attention because there is probably something at work in my daytime world that needs it. Amen.