

A Certain Place

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. 11 He reached a certain place and spent the night there. When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. 12 He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. 13 Suddenly the Lord was standing on it[a] and saying, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. 15 I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you."

16 When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. 17 He was terrified and thought, This sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven. 18 After Jacob got up early in the morning, he took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He named that sacred place Bethel.

Genesis 28:10-19a

It is important to sleep, but not for the reasons you're probably thinking. Sleep is a spiritual practice. It's true. Dorothy Bass in her book *Receiving the Day* notices that each account of each new day of Creation in the Genesis story concludes: *And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...* God's creative work begins in the evenings, about the same time we are winding down, preparing for bed. Sleep is a Sabbath practice, it is the embodiment of the phrase, "Let go, and Let God." When we practice going to sleep, we are learning how to accept a world that is out of our control; we are learning how to receive the challenging uncertainties of life with a peaceful heart and a quiet soul. Sleep is a spiritual practice.

We can learn a lot about the importance of sleep from Jacob. Jacob was a fugitive from his own family. He had wisely duped his ignorant, hairy, red-necked brother Esau. First Jacob leveraged a pot of porridge for his elder brother's birthright, which was essentially Esau's share of the family inheritance. Then he conspired with his mother and deprived Esau of his father Isaac's blessing, the very blessing that is typically reserved for the eldest son, and invokes prosperity, fertility, and security for the future. To describe this grand act of sibling supersession in contemporary language, Jacob Bernie-Madoffed his own brother! He lied, duped, deceived, and ran away with his brother's future. Esau was left seething with resentment and consoling himself by spitting threats against his brother's life.

On the run, Jacob found himself half way between home and Haran in a certain place, a miscellaneous place, a place Jacob had never known before. In that certain place, the unfamiliar landscape was slowly swallowed by the evening darkness, and Jacob was left to wrestle with his questions: would Esau track him down? Would his family ever take him back? How in the world would this all work out?

You know as well as I know that sleep can be hard to come by. Sweet dreams don't come easily. How many nights this week did you drift peacefully to slumber, unencumbered by a care *sigh*. Just

because the sheets are soft, the pillow is comfortable, and our bodies are exhausted, doesn't mean sleep will come quickly. Let's think for a few moments about the things that keep us awake.

It begins in childhood when the simple darkness of the night is enough to keep sleepy eyes agape. What was that creak?! Who's under my bed?! As Calvin and Hobbes have imagined, "Oh, blood-red eyes and tentacles! Throbbing, pulsing ventricles! Mucus-oozing pores and frightful claws!" With the unleashed imagination of a child, the darkness of nighttime becomes downright terrifying.

As adults, the darkness of night is no less worrisome; our imaginations just don't have to stretch as far. Oh the vulnerabilities which haunt our sleeping hours: the ghoulish memories of embarrassments past, the heavy, smothering hand of relentless guilt, the gathering clouds of financial uncertainty, and the looming, lurking prospect of precarious health. The darkness of night, whatever our age, seems to invite our fears.

We read Psalm 139 this morning for its quotable, devotional lines, of which there are many. But if we were to read the psalmist's work from beginning to end, we may gain a sense of the deep dis-ease and the palpable desperation of this midnight psalm. Hear the words again:

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the blood thirsty would depart from me – those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

In the context of the ominous darkness of night with bloodthirsty villains concealed in the shadows, the psalmist's cries to an omniscient and omnipresent, with-me-in-the-womb God are no longer just sweet devotional sentiments, but rather, an urgent prayer for intervention, justification, and safety. We hear these beautiful words again as if quivering through the lips of a sleep-starved fugitive. We may not have murderous bandits after us, but I imagine we've all had nights on the run.

Jacob was not just fleeing home. His parents were sending him away to find a bride. Esau, as it was, had brought bitterness to the family years before by marrying not one but two Hittite women which isn't so much a commentary about the women as it is Esau. The Hebrew word describes Esau's decision to marry as a "*provocation*" toward his parents. It was the kind of bullheaded, adolescent obstinacy that almost, almost, justified Jacob's pilfering of Esau's blessing. Justified or not, Jacob was now obediently on his way to find a bride with the rhythm of his father's blessing beating in his ears. "*May God Almighty, El Shaddai, bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, a company of people. May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien.*"

There is something special about taking possession of a space of your own, whether it's your first bedroom as a child or a three-bedroom fixer-up in a neighborhood that has potential. You can fill a place of your own with the most satisfying dreams, and there'd still be room for more. I remember my first college roommate..... I hardly slept that semester, what with all the excitement of my first new room.

I imagine Jacob would have been pretty excited; *so eager* to start his future that he could have walked straight through the night. *So anxious* to get to the place where he would finally *settle down* that he never stopped to rest. But Jacob did stop. In the midst of dark uncertainty and on the edge of a future that was about to unfold, Jacob pulled up a pillow and there in that uncertain place, Jacob slept.

In his slumber, Jacob received the promise of God: *I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying... I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.* Because Jacob was able to sleep, he awoke with a vivid and worship-inspiring sense of God's vital presence and enduring promise. Jacob lay down in a certain place, but he awoke in a CERTAIN place, a guaranteed and promised place.

They called Jacob an ankle-grabber, a man who wrestled with humankind and with God and prevailed. He was cunning, ambitious, and hard working. Yet it was when Jacob fell fast asleep that he received the blessing of God. Sleep is a spiritual practice. When we sleep, we demonstrate our faith in God. We entrust all of our cares and concerns into God's hands.

When Abraham blessed Jacob, he called God *El Shaddai*, the mighty one, the one of the mountains. But the name means more than this. *El Shaddai* also conjures up the image of a woman feeding an infant. *El Shaddai*, the mighty one, the nurturing mother. When we fall asleep, we are not alone. Our tender mother, *El Shaddai*, cradles us in her arms. She bundles us up in love and whispers promises in our ear. In the arms of *El Shaddai*, we have a sure and certain place. Trust in *El Shaddai*, children of God, and sleep well.