

“Blessed and Stressed”
Genesis 28:10-22
Andrew Foster Connors
7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2020 during the Pandemic

The chickens have come home to roost for Jacob. Having tricked his father out of the blessing that belongs to his older brother, aided by the shrewd assistance of his mother, Jacob finds himself blessed and therefore stressed, not the equation we normally celebrate, but the more common one we find in the Bible. Despite our American-born fantasies, biblical blessings almost always exact some kind of cost, and for Jacob that cost is total disruption. His brother Esau is so angry that he’s ready to kill his sibling, a scene familiar to us all, whether from the Cain and Abel story or from our own family of origin. And so I imagine Jacob trudging along that first night of his difficult journey - leaving his dysfunctional family - the only type you find in the book of Genesis - on his way, one foot in front of the other, hoping that somewhere ahead lies a better life, a different quality of relationship, a different kind of home. That’s the *hopeful* version of the story. More likely, Jacob was struggling. He was on the first leg of a very long journey to rebuild his life - with no idea of whether his family to be would be more functional than the one he had left, of how long it would take, of what it might cost him, of whether it would work out; with only the assurance that his father’s blessing would be sufficient. And that’s not very reassuring, at least not this week.

Many of us hit a wall this week. I know that from just about every conversation I’ve been a part of. It was further verified by a therapist who told me that this seemed to be the week that her clients struggled the most, across the board. I know I did. With Covid-19 positivity rates on the rise - all those shutdowns we endured in our region suddenly feel like sacrifices for nothing because as the President’s spokesperson put it this week he’s not going to let science get in the way of reopening.¹ The US has now clearly achieved most ignorant nation status because some of our leaders would rather trade our freedoms to safely eat in a restaurant, go shopping, to attend school, to go to work, for the freedom not to be told to wear a mask. Things are headed in the wrong direction as they were at the beginning but with the major difference that this time we have less hope to look forward to. No timeline for when this might end. With very real data this time about just how hard it is to implement shared practices in a culture conditioned not to share. Plus, no new novelty about Zooming worship, or online happy

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<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8531199/White-House-vows-not-let-science-stand-way-Donald-Trumps-push-reopen-schools.html>

hours, or “we’re all in this together” pipe dreams. There is only what seems like the dreary inevitability of a return to the lockdowns, and circumscribed vacations, zoom fatigue and less resources to make any of it happen.

Meanwhile, a number of fellow clergy colleagues from across the city continue to fight for community-based testing sites while our Governor releases a new book promoting himself as the one who “saved Baltimore” during the uprising.² The same Governor who undermines Baltimore City everytime he turns around - cutting funding to the red line, or money to redevelop State Center, or funding for education, with no plan to address the fact that Black and Brown folks are experiencing higher rates of illness and death to COVID.

I feel the weariness of so many. I feel the weariness of so many of you I spoke to this week, the weariness of colleagues across the country, the weariness of people of color trying to survive on the one hand or welcome white folks to the newly woke club on the other.

Jacob, weary from his own dwindling hope, lies down to sleep, that last true refuge for anyone in seemingly hopeless situations. He lies down and dreams of the ladder. It’s not the ladder that we sometimes sing about. “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” That slave spiritual that was among the first to be appropriated by whites. No, no. Jacob’s not the one doing the climbing according to the text. It’s not the stairway to heaven that Led Zeppelin sang about in what some have argued is the great rock song of all time. That “lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold. She’s buying a stairway to Heaven.” Jacob isn’t trying to buy a stairway to heaven. He’s not on the ladder, every rung taking him higher and higher. He’s on the ground observing angels - messengers of God - coming and going. He’s on the ground, awakened for the first time to the reality that heaven and earth has been bridged. Aware that the presence of God has been made concrete right in the place where he’s sleeping. Aware that God is closer than he imagined entering into our world and its business.

It’s the dream on which all other significant dreams depend. The dream of God coming and going in our lives, in our world - of God’s power active and available in our time and place. It’s the dream on which all significant dreams depend. I mean the big dreams that we are afraid to speak aloud because they seem so far out of reach. The kinds of dreams that aren’t readily achievable. The kinds of dreams you dare not name for fear of being called out as foolish because they are so unattainable: like the dream of family, for a young adult running from a broken one. Like the dream of land for a people who have never had land of their own. Like the dream of security for a people

² “In upcoming political memoir, Maryland Gov. Hogan calls 2015 Baltimore unrest his ‘baptism of fire,” Pamela Wood, *The Baltimore Sun*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/politics/bs-pr-pol-hogan-book-20200714-yepqgs2x5xfhdhkgghn6zu4zfowa-story.html>

so accustomed to having a knee on their neck that to speak that dream out loud is at least laughable if not offensive.

If you are going to believe in those sorts of dreams, much less pursue them, at a time and in a space when everything seems like it's falling apart, then the dream of God's presence and power is the prerequisite.

Like the dream one of my colleagues who grew up in west Baltimore, now pastoring a church on North Avenue not far from the Brown Memorial Church building. "My dream is to rebuild west Baltimore," he told a few of us last week who had gathered outside, in person, weary from watching the world through our screens. "I'm weary today, he said, so I have a hard time articulating that dream in this moment. But my dream is jobs for those who need them, drug treatment on demand, investment in housing, in undoing every bit of the redlining, the disinvestment, the highways that cut up our neighborhoods - undoing it all - everything that I've grown up with. That's what I want to spend my life doing. That's my dream even though I am so very weary."

The next day I roused myself from my own weariness to join that same colleague walking up and down North Avenue, inviting people, person to person, to the community testing clinic at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Passing dilapidated housing, people strung out on drugs or liquor at the bus stops, groups of people drinking at 1 in the afternoon - on the same stretch of Baltimore where the uprising occurred, where Governor Hogan claims to have saved the city. And I thought to myself, the only way my brother's dream is going to become a reality is if heaven itself opens up and God sends us some help.

The thing is, according to the story, *heaven has opened up. God is already here.* There are messengers of justice and grace already among us. God's promises are already assured. That's what God says in the dream. "I'm your God - you Jacob - with nothing but a rock for a pillow and a blessing from your father. You will have the family you've dreamed about, the land you can hardly imagine, a blessing so rich you and your brother won't need to fight over it - there will be more than enough to go around - enough to bless all the people of the earth." "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." It's the good news that Jacob's dreamed about but he can't fully accept it. It's the good news that he needs to stop acting like he's got to chase down blessings and see that they've already been given. But even then, Jacob doesn't get it. He doesn't get it.

God tells him in the dream that I will be with you *wherever you go*, but Jacob says *God is in this particular place, and I did not know it.* God tells him in the dream that there are no "ifs" to God's blessing. He doesn't need to pursue it like some limited resource that needs to be extracted before it goes away. There will be more than enough blessing to go around. But Jacob says, "*If* God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking *and* will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so

that I return safely to my father's household, *then* the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

It's like the blessing is too good for Jacob to accept so he cuts it back down to something that fits more with what he's already decided is possible for his life and the world. The blessing is too outrageously generous to be accepted by someone who has already treated blessing as something that you have to snatch quickly before others take it for themselves.

Isn't that the way we're living in these times? As if the entire citizenry has gone crazy, other people are not to be trusted, and justice itself has to be snatched quickly before others take it away? As if the whole nation is corrupt, the majority is crazy, or unwilling to address our racist present, or unwilling to work together to solve our problems? In fact this view is so widely accepted that I wouldn't be surprised if many of you are sitting there scratching your heads going, "well how can this preacher look at the world right now and tell us that's *not true*?"

Nicholas Kristof wrote a piece this week, pointing to all kinds of blessings that are here right now. The fact that 60% of Americans including a majority of white people now support the ideas promoted by Black Lives Matter. That 89% of voters support higher taxes on the wealthy to reduce poverty. 88% think masks should be worn at least sometimes. 84% trust medical scientists on the coronavirus, 67% think we are not doing enough to address climate change.³

It's like all the ingredients that we need to be transformed as a nation, as a world, as a people are right there on the counter in front of us just waiting for people to come together and serve up the meal so many have been hungering for. And yet, we're more like Jacob that we let on - he, who immediately after being radically blessed by God, makes that blessing smaller than it actually is. Instead of taking that blessing to the bank, and cashing it in for all it's worth. We're shopping with coupons when we should be spending every bit of blessing on the lives and the city that we're a part of.

Maybe it's because we've assumed, wrongly, that blessings come when all is well. When we are feeling good. When we have energy, sitting watching a beautiful sunset in nature, or whatever. Instead of when we're on the run, or our family has come apart, or our country has gone to pot. All the times and places when blessings actually come for the biblical characters. The promise of a child when Sarai and Abraham can't have one. The promise of land when Israel has none. The promise of a future to Hagar and Ishmael when she's accepted the reality of his death. The promise of a family after Jacob has run from his. The promise of freedom to slaves in Egypt. The promise of

³ Nicholas Kristof, "We Interrupt this Gloom to Offer. . . Hope," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-blm-america-hope.html>

restoration to exiles from the promised land. Those promises come to us in the midst of turmoil and we are invited to accept them for every bit of hope that they are worth.

John Lewis died on Friday. I wept when I heard it yesterday. That nonviolent warrior of a man who embraced his calling, and wrestled justice out of unjust suffering. He endured beatings for our sake, to give us a possibility of a future where there was no future, a future we have yet to fully claim. But the deeper thing that I've always wanted in my own life is what Lewis seemed to find - a joyous life in the midst of struggle. A refusal to choose between the two. "Do not get lost in a sea of despair," he said. "Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime."⁴

It is the struggle fueled by Jacob's dream - that God is very much present in our struggles - in yours - in mine - in ours together. God is coming and going, sending messengers among us to teach us that when we trust in that dream all others are made possible. Messengers like CT Vivian, like John Lewis to teach us joy and hope to sustain us in the struggle.

"Hope right now in America is bloodied and battered, but this is the kind of hope that is successful," said Senator Cory Booker, Democrat of New Jersey. "It's hope that has lost its naïveté."⁵ I say, good riddance, naïvete. Blessings abound. Let's start claiming them together so that we can take part in God's joyous revolution already underway.

⁴ Katharine Q. Seelye, "John Lewis, Towering Figure of Civil Rights Era, Dies at 80," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/us/john-lewis-dead.html>.

⁵ Ibid.