

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, out there in the stony wilderness where there are more rocks than vegetation, Jacob has discovered a “thin place”, hasn’t he?! A thin –place where he is curiously at the border of heaven and earth, and can see in this vision, this dream, evidence of *God’s* own dream, and the normally veiled activity of the true kingdom of heaven. Angels are going up and down the ladder, carrying messages, delivering blessings, reading their lists and checking them twice. And yes, we might have the idea that thin places are notably tranquil and peaceful places of rest and contemplation, but when the curtain is drawn back, when we get a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, turns out it is really a busy place. Not chaotic, you understand, but a place where there are important things to be done, and as quickly and efficiently as possible. At least that’s Jacob’s experience. We often associate thin places with compelling moments from our personal history, and then maybe you wonder, as I do, whether that association may be more nostalgic than spiritual. But the most astonishing places that seem to be on the border between heaven and earth are often the ones which take us by surprise.

I remember when Gale and I and the kids were on one of our first road trips to the American West, in a rented van with a series of road maps which defied re-folding. We were in southern Utah, and were astonished by the landscape outside the windows. And then we stopped at a rest area. We hadn’t seen another vehicle in a long time, and the rest area was deserted. We got out of the car, and once we had gotten emotionally past the ominous sign warning of rattlesnakes in the bathrooms, I paused to just look around. I thought for a moment that I had gone deaf: there was absolutely no sound. No ambient noise, no sounds of traffic or airliners, no background noise of civilization whatsoever. If there had been any wind, there would have been no trees to rustle. We were on a ridge, and in every direction there were cliffs and canyons, all a beautiful golden color in the sunshine. But nothing was moving. It was like a vast cemetery, like an abandoned museum. And yet, there was this timeless spirituality about it, and though it seemed completely dead in every observable way, I had the sense of so many things going on behind the scenes, hidden from my view. Now, I have never been to the Holy Land, but I’ve seen pictures, and to tell the truth, it looks a lot like Utah. Imagine Jacob, all alone in that landscape, not a tent nor airliner in sight, and in this silent place he has a revealingly contradictory vision, one of the business of the kingdom as it works tirelessly to keep its part of the covenant bargain.

Jacob has discovered a thin place. And just in time! He has left home on a mission to find a wife, but probably also to escape Esau’s fury. Yep, Jacob had succeeded in tricking Esau to trade his birthright for a bowl of soup, and in tricking his father Isaac into giving him Esau’s sacred blessing. It was underhanded and, well, complicated, and it made something of a mess. It was a good time to get out of town. But Jacob also had to face the changes and transitions of adulthood. If he was in fact to be the rightful heir to those curious promises that he had heard about, those promises God made to his grandfather Abraham about property, progeny, provision, and protection, then he would need to grow up. He needed to take his place at the head of a new generation. He needed to settle down with at least one wife and plan carefully for the future. The thin place he encounters on this mission, mysterious as it is, will inspire him. Not so much because of its magical revelation, but because in the midst of it all he hears God’s voice. God speaks to Jacob in this place, maybe for the first time. You

may remember that, by contrast, God and Abraham had quite a few conversations, but then we might make the case that much of Abe's life was spent in thin places. Jacob has had to wait his turn, has had to wait for this visionary time.

And God gives Jacob a command, an imperative. God says: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go". God wants Jacob to hear the promises first hand; God wants him to *know* the agenda, the dream, the intention to which he is being called. And isn't that the real revelation that comes from a thin place? Isn't that the real insight that a thin place makes available to us? The experience we call a thin place is a deeply personal one, an event of time and space which seems to have been made just for you, or me. And just as blessings only attain their fulfillment when put into service for God, so too the borderland experience: The personal connection we feel at a time like that is a calling. There is something God wants us to know. There is something God wants us to do. The thin place may seem like just an invitation to lie back and drink in all the awesome wonder, and that would certainly be a pleasant way to spend the day, but I think we would be missing the point. When the kingdom of heaven draws near, God wants to speak to us first-hand, and the message, I think, is a call for us to know our part in the realization of God's dream.

When Jacob awakens from his visionary sleep, he finds that he has indeed come to *know*, to have faith in the future. He says "Surely the Lord is in this place...and I didn't know it!" He might just as well have said: "God is indeed in my *life*...and I didn't even know it!" And now he knows what God is calling him to do; he is to play a significant role in the blessing of all the earth's inhabitants. His offspring, once he finally finds a wife and partner, will change the face of the world, spreading out to all the points of the compass. This frightens him a little, for it is a calling which will test his courage, his strength, and his faith. But he will always remember this this-place experience, probably repeat it to his skeptical grandkids so often that they begin to actually believe it! It has been a personal, life-altering event, and Jacob will never look at his life and his potential the same small way again. Ritually, he makes a shrine out of the random rocks and anoints them with oil, marking the holiness he has found here and just how much it meant to him.

A major theme in these ancient tales of the Patriarchs and their wives and families is the proclamation that God always takes the initiative. In this covenantal relationship which is being forged out through the generations of Abraham's descendants, the Lord always makes the first move, always steers them toward God's intended destination. Hindsight might just be a little in play in the telling of these stories, but each generation in turn seems to be responding to God's initiative, God's call. In today's Old Testament scripture, it is becoming Jacob's turn. There in the midst of this physical and emotional wilderness, he is given the opportunity to be fascinated by the sight of God's messengers scurrying about doing God's business, up and down the stairway to heaven, creating a future and a destiny. He knows that he needs to make changes which will permit him to play his part. And, dear friends, in our own time and place, we are given such opportunities, too, as it becomes our turn. And, like Jacob, God will be there at our side, wanting us to know, to know that we are each important and loved and needed in the unfolding of the great creative dream. So next time when you are surprised to find yourself in a thin place, when you find yourself curiously at the border of heaven and earth, I encourage you to listen for God's voice, and ponder what the Lord is calling you to know and what to do about it. It will surely be your turn. Amen

