

July 23, 2023

# The Eleventh Sunday of Pentecost

**Genesis 28**

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One of the biggest hurdles to a Jewish/Christian spirituality is the modern person's struggle to believe that God is still active in the world. When you read the Hebrew Scriptures, you encounter a lively, and interrupting being, One so in love with the creation that she can't help but seek to reveal itself to it.

Modernity has been characterized a number of different ways but let me offer a way to think about it that was illuminative for me when I was studying theology in seminary. In 2005 Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion from UNC-Chapel Hill, published a book called *Soul Searching*, which was his analysis of thousands of surveys he conducted on the religion of Millennials in our country. After asking a number of questions about what the next generation believe about God, he came up with his own moniker for the prevailing religion, dubbed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or MTD. Smith interviewed Christians of various stripes, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians but also Jews and Muslims – interestingly, he discovered that no matter the religion of affiliation, MTD pretty much summed up their views on God.

M is for Moralistic – God is a moral being who wants humans to behave ethically observing the Golden Rule to treat others as one would want to be treated, as taught by most of the world's major religions. This Moral being also has a kind of Therapeutic role – wishing us to be happy and do whatever it is that cultivates positive self-esteem. Deism – this God has pretty much turned the reigns of the world over to humans and maintains a distinctly hands off approach to world affairs, a God who is, we might say, administratively relaxed. I remember a presentation on MTD in seminary when the lecturer closed his slideshow with a picture of the unforgettable butler from the *Downton Abbey* – Mr. Carson. He suggested, basically, that this is the deity we are believing in – a celestial Mr. Carson. One that stands off to the side, helps us in a pinch, and just wants everyone to get along.

Now, for one – I rather like thinking of God as Mr. Carson, there are certainly worse images for God. The challenge though is that if this is your image of God you are going to have a tough time reading the Hebrew Scriptures. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures isn't a cool-headed butler, but a fiery lover. This God isn't concerned with superficial niceness, but with costly justice,

and believes there is something much more determinative for human flourishing than morality: this God is very concerned with the idols her people continue to bow down to, which perverts all versions of morality. This is a jealous God. Its not that MTD doesn't believe in God, it's just hard to see how this Moral Therapeutic Being makes much difference in the day to day of the world, or in a word, how this God is living and active as the God of the Hebrew Scriptures most certainly is.

How do we let our imaginations be shaped by the Holy Scriptures just as much as by a kind of therapeutic deism? Is it still possible to believe in a living and active God in our own day? If so, how do we speak about it? I've quoted Rowan Williams before who says that theology is our attempt to say the least silly things about God as possible. Can we speak about God acting in the world without sounding silly? Let's find out. What I'd like to do this morning look at Genesis 28 and consider three windows through which we might perceive divine action. I'm going to call these windows: beside, beneath, and beyond.

One of the reasons I think people fear an active, living, interceding God is that they tend to pictorialize this being as an old Zeus like figure who all but arbitrarily dips the divine finger into the created pie. We struggle – rightfully so – with a God who is almost like the playwright that can't help but jump on the stage to interrupt the show at random. Notice here in the text, though, that the God Jacob encounters doesn't come to him on high. This God doesn't intrude on creation. Jacob sees the vision of the ladder, but did you notice where the Lord was – the Lord wasn't at the top of the ladder on a throne: the Lord stood beside Jacob. That is, the Lord came down the ladder to be with him. How does God act in the world? Not from without, but alongside, through accompanying us.

Where might you trace the divine action in your life? Perhaps this story invites us not merely to look to the heavens for a divine miracle, but to lower our gaze, to look beside us to an Accompanying Presence. Well, who are the people walking alongside you, accompanying you on the journey? Who is that person who shows up in your desert place? Perhaps that person who gently said to you, I know it doesn't feel okay right now,

but I'll sit with you til it does. Or maybe when you had all but lost your faith, it was the friend or spouse who took your arm in theirs and said, that's okay you can lean on mine. Jacob has fled from his home – remember he deceived his father and usurped the family blessing pretending to be Esau. He runs away, flies the coop, and he's headed to spend some time with his Uncle Laban. He is all alone, or thinks he is alone, until he notices the Lord beside him. Who are those people who are beside us even in the desert places? Those are our good friends, and who's to say that God isn't accompanying you through them? It's one of the ways the Living God acts: beside us.

God doesn't just act beside or alongside us. God acts beneath the surface of our lives. Notice how God speaks to Jacob. God doesn't shout, doesn't thunder, doesn't part any waters, or set any bushes on fire. God works beneath the surface, in the quietness of Jacob's sleep. God works through Jacob's unconscious, through his dream, working as it were from beneath him, from his depths. We often look out onto the world, or pick up the newspaper, and wonder where God could possibly be. We are so accustomed to looking at headlines, and tweets, and images. God's action is often deeper than that. What helps you live your life beyond the surface and the superficial? What helps you sink into the depths of your heart? I had a therapist for many years, a Jungian, who was known for helping people explore their dreams. Now I never had any dreams of a divine ladder or anything that marvelous, but just talking about these helped me go a little bit deeper, seeing parts of my soul that were beneath my conscious awareness. Therapists, spiritual directors, poets and novelists can also help you enter the depths. Poetry in particular is all about shaking loose a new meaning from the prosaic, helping us excavate the meaning and truth and beauty beneath ordinary language. We need these therapists, poets and the arts to help us perceive God. We need those people who remind us that there is great mystery beneath the surface of things. The Living God acts beside us and beneath us.

And also, beyond us. Jacob's journey into the desert is full of beyonds. Surely God cannot exist, out here, beyond the family – but God is beyond his imagination. The Living God is, yes, recognizably beside and beneath us; the beyond is harder to

speaking of, because the beyond in this passage is that the Lord acts beyond Jacob's present moment. Did you catch all the promises the Lord makes to him, all the future tense? "I will give you land, and offspring, and your inheritance; I will give you my presence." God says, "I am the God beyond your present. All time is but an instant to me, including your future."

Katie, Addie, and I were away this past week visiting some friends in Vermont, a trip that has become a staple of our summer. We know we are getting close to their Lakehouse in North Ferrisburgh when we pass the telephone pole with the osprey's nest way at the top of it. Every year, for the last 4, we've seen that nest, and this year as we were driving up to it, the osprey just took off in soaring flight arcing over the pastures, offering its aviary blessing to the earthbound cows and sheep. Now, I could just say that osprey's timing and the beauty of his flight was a natural occurrence – perhaps there is something in his DNA that is stimulated into flight when he sees a white Subaru from out of state. But I chose to see it as God – God welcoming our family into the hospitality and warmth of the Hurd's. It was God saying, "I am here, waiting to refresh you. And provide you some babysitting help." The Living God acts beyond us, in and through the natural order, through dreams and osprey and everything in between.

While in Vermont, I read an article in the Atlantic called "Scientists found Ripples in Space and Time. And You Have to Buy Groceries," written by Adam Frank, a physicist at the University of Rochester. The whole universe is humming (the article begins). Actually, the whole universe is Mongolian throat singing. Every star, every planet, every continent, every building, every person is vibrating along to the slow cosmic beat. The discovery, made by NANOGrav, the North American Nanohertz Observatory for Gravitational Waves, a couple of weeks ago proved the existence of warps and waves within the space-time continuum, putting a joyful exclamation point on the theory first introduced by Einstein over a century ago. Space-time, what we take for reality, is a single entity (not a disjointed assemblage of energy pockets) comprising a flexible fabric that could be stretched and compressed, bent and warped. The universe isn't just a disconnected arrangement of stars and galaxies and particles, but an interaction of ancient

gravitational waves of energy. Space-time is living and moving, being created, always permeated by these ripples of energy – we can hear it now. Frank writes: Every proton and neutron in every atom from the tip of your toes to the top of your head is shifting, shuttling, and vibrating in a collective purr within which the entire history of the universe is implicated. And if you put your hand down on a chair or table or anything else nearby, that object, too, is dancing that slow waltz. This is astonishing to me to think that the Beyond is not silent; its joy, its vibrancy, its vitality is all humming with life. And the moment of spiritual wonder happens when you realize that you are a part of that movement, that life, that flow, that dance. That vast, expansive, pulsing energy flows through you and me.

I'm not suggesting that God and the universe are the same thing. More that the material world is rather like the glove of the divine hand, or better still, the song that God never tires of singing into being. Beside, beneath, beyond you is that song.

And yet, this can still be hard for me to feel, to believe on an ordinary day. Look at my life and often you'll see someone struggling to believe in an active and living God; much of the time I'm too caught up in my own activity to remember God's; I often drive too fast through my days to notice the ospreys. Much of the time, truth be told, I am a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist. And yet as I sat with the text this week, I felt old Jacob pointing me to another way, inviting me to reflect on what it might mean to more fully entrust myself to this God who meets me in the beside, beneath, and beyond of my life. I invite you into that same wondering. Consider, Jacob invites us, the adventure it might set you on to see your life as a response to this God. Consider the wonder it might evoke in you. Consider the way it might enlarge your heart and awaken your senses.

“And the Lord stood beside Jacob and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.’” This is the Living God, whom to worship, adore, and follow is to come fully alive ourselves.

