

“Where Hope Lives”
July 19, 2026
Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25

Jacob’s story is the most fascinating and complex story in the Bible. More even than David’s story, which is full of intrigue. I find Jacob’s fascinating because he is such a flawed hero. He’s manipulative and deceptive, yet somehow also sympathetic. In this scene we find Jacob on the run. We’re actually given two reasons why he’s left home. One of them is to fulfill his parents’ wish that he not marry a Canaanite woman and find a wife among his mother’s relatives. The other, that seems more plausible to me, is he’s running away from his brother, Esau, after stealing their father’s blessing that was meant for the older brother. They’re twins, but Esau was born first. So, already we find there’s uncertainty around Jacob. His life is complicated.

But then, whose isn’t, right? We all have complications we need to navigate. We all come from families that have challenges. Or we work in places where we don’t get along with everyone for one reason or another. Sometimes a personality just rubs us the wrong way. We have uncles who talk too much or cousins who are stuck-up. We might have co-workers who get under our skin or bosses who are too demanding. Life is full of complications and there are times, I imagine, for a lot of us when we’d like to just pitch it in and take off. Most of us wouldn’t actually do that, of course, but it is fun to think about. Jacob sort of represents that impulse to leave it all behind. Trouble is, giving in to it can often leave us where Jacob is: in the middle of nowhere, using a rock for a pillow.

His dream, that famous dream we’ve all sung about, showing angels going up and down a ladder or an escalator or something accompanied by God’s voice assuring him he was not alone even in that lonely, desolate place, stands as a sign of God’s presence even in the most desperate circumstances. The psalm that was assigned to go along with this story is Psalm 139: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” Jacob discovers God has more in store for him than his life of cheating and conniving has so far revealed. And he’s astonished to realize God was there without his knowing it. As if there were any place where God is absent; as if he’d stumbled upon God by accident, or as if he were playing Blind Man’s Bluff out there in the desert.

The real lesson we should take from this encounter is we never escape God’s presence because we exist entirely in God. The great teacher of the Church, Catherine of Siena who lived in the 14th century, said, “All the way to heaven is heaven.” What she meant is we’re never outside God’s circle of care. Or as St. Bonaventure once said, “God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” So, even though Jacob arrives at this deserted place with no real prospects for his future, running from a dishonorable past, he discovers there is hope for him so long as he remains open to the movement of God in his life and aware of God’s presence.

For people who are struggling with circumstances they can’t control and are on the verge of losing hope, Jacob’s story can offer a reminder that even the most desperate situation may not

have the last word in our lives. Hope lives in the midst of those circumstances even if we can't envision what it looks like. Times of doubt are a feature of life not just for Jacob or other figures in the Bible, but for the communities that hold these stories as sacred. The experience of doubt is common in our own time. As scholar Kathleen O'Connor writes in her commentary on Genesis, "In a time when religious institutions are undergoing change, and in some cases even collapse, faith is difficult. In a time when violence, wars, personal and communal tragedies become instantly and widely known, faith is difficult. In a time when change, division, and deceit seem to overwhelm the foundations of life, faith is difficult."

How do we hold onto hope when things seem hopeless? Over the last two weeks we've heard about two more deaths related to immigration enforcement, one in Texas and one in Maine. We're told neither of them was the target of those operations. Where does hope live for the families of Lorenzo Salgado Araujo and Joan Sebastian Guerrero? How do others who have become targets of similar enforcement efforts and are now in detention in deplorable conditions find cause for hope? I came across a story recently about a song titled "Even When He Is Silent" that uses words found scrawled on the wall of a hidden tunnel beneath some homes in Cologne, Germany by Jews who were hiding there during the Nazi era. The message they left was: "I believe in the sun, though it be dark; I believe in God, though He be silent; I believe in neighborly love, though it be unable to reveal itself."

Jacob had a dream where God came to him in person. Most of us don't have that good fortune. We have to rely on other means to encounter hope. Paul understood this. One thing I find especially fascinating about his letters, not the stories about Paul we find in Acts, but the letters he wrote himself, is he never describes a direct encounter with God. To the Romans he writes, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." For Paul hope lived in the shared identity of the children of God. God's presence is revealed in our life together in spite of the hardships we might endure.

In Houston, Texas and again in Biddeford, Maine, people poured out of their homes when word got about the deaths of their neighbors. People joined in protest of the killings, demanding full investigations. They refused to stay silent or ignore the injustice of what had happened. They gathered around their immigrant neighbors and let them know they are still valued and loved and are not alone. There may not be much more people can do, but I'm sure the outpouring of concern and affection was a source of hope for those affected by these policies and the brutality being used to enforce them.

There is suffering in this world, we know that. We go through it, certainly, and sometimes we even cause it. We go through losses and disappointments, we get driven out and harassed, we hurt others in our insecurities. And there are times when we forget who we are and fail to discern God's presence with us. But if we are led by the Spirit of God, we become children of God. And once we become aware that God's Spirit is joined to our spirit, aware that we are adopted as children of God, we no longer live in isolation. We are connected to each other and to the whole creation. And that's where hope lives. It lives in that connection we share.

That means the suffering others endure is our suffering. The groaning of the whole creation echoes within us and is our groaning, our longing for redemption. That's why when we see footage of a man being dragged out of his car lifeless after being shot by authorities while his three-year-old daughter watches in horror, we feel it in our gut. And we cannot turn away. Hope lives in that aching we carry; it lives in the groaning of our spirits.

As children of God who no longer measure our lives by outward appearances only, by the standards of the flesh as Paul would say, we are called to live in ways that reflect God's presence and acknowledge the constant exchange between heaven and earth that Jacob saw in his dream. For him that dream meant he was no longer running away from his past but running toward his future. His life would continue to be complicated. But he would never again be lost and wandering and alone. In fact, in time he will become "Israel," the embodiment of the whole nation.

Paul says the same happens to us when we're saved in hope. We embody the whole creation and there is no longer any separation between us. We're bound in God's Spirit so that hope can live in us as we live for others. As God's children led by the Spirit of God, let hope come alive in you; and through you, through the compassion you share, the love you reveal, the care you take to stand with those who are vulnerable and lost, may the groaning of your spirits join God's Spirit until the longing of creation is fulfilled.

Amen