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## *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*

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**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton**  
**Proper 11A**  
**Genesis 28:10-22 (extended passage from the Lectionary)**

One of the few highlights of the French program at Mount Pleasant High School was the annual trip to Quebec City. It had the benefit of providing a French-speaking population closer to Michigan than Paris, and encouraged students to stay in the program at least through level II when you were eligible to go on the trip. I was still fairly new to Michigan the year I went, and was excited to see points north.

It was a typical trip for traveling high school students. We were rambunctious on the bus, quick to complain about the food, and interested in just how late we would be allowed to stay up at night. There was great attention paid to shopping and sightseeing, and less on actually working on our language skills. Luckily, use of those skills was not vital for day to day survival. When we were sent off in groups to encounter the culture, I suspect we gave off some obvious signals that we were Americans. Somehow, it never failed that when we entered a shop or restaurant, we would be greeted in English. We toured the sites, suffered in somewhat austere lodging, and generally enjoyed the time away from school.

As a ninth grader, I was not overly religious, and certainly did not imagine this trip to be any sort of pilgrimage or time of spiritual encounter.

During one of our bus tours of the surrounding area, we pulled up to the large Catholic Basilica in St. Anne De Beaupre, about twenty miles outside of Quebec City. I had never been to such a striking gothic structure and found myself surprisingly quiet. As we walked in to see the church, I was immediately captivated by a huge wall at the entrance. It was full of crutches that had been left by pilgrims who had received healing at the Shrine. There were old wooden versions, metallic newcomers, and the wall was literally covered from floor to ceiling. The shrine has been known as a place of miracles since one of the builders who suffered from severe scoliosis, left his crutch behind after its construction was completed.

As I stood there with my neck craned towards the ceiling trying to count all the crutches scaling the wall, my French teacher said softly behind me, "I do not understand how some people cannot believe." Being in public school, we had not had any conversations about our beliefs before this moment, but I looked at her and simply nodded. I did not have words to explain what I was seeing or even a sense of how it fit my beliefs, but I did sense that I was in a place of holiness and that heaven and earth were closely linked.

In Genesis, we hear today the well known story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob, hardly a towering example of faith like his grandfather Abraham is on the run. He has through trickery and deception claimed the blessing and birthright of his older brother Esau, and now fears for his life. He has left everything he has known and stopped off in an unknown place to sleep, before continuing on to meet his uncle and find a wife. It is not a place of comfort, and we do not have any indication that Jacob is feeling particularly spiritual. He is just trying to survive. But as he makes his bed with a hard stone pillow, he drifts off to a place where God is able to get his attention.

He has a vision of heaven and earth connected, with messengers traveling up and down. And in the midst of his turmoil and fear, he hears an amazing promise from God. God reminds Jacob that he is the God of his grandfather, Abraham, the God of his father, Isaac, and the God of yes, even him, the deceiver. God's power is so great that despite the bleak look of the situation, despite the fact that Jacob appears to be leaving his homeland forever, God will act and bless Jacob, his land, and his offspring. God will bring him home again.

When Jacob awakes, he exclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place---and I did not know it!" He has found himself in the presence of God and his hard stone pillow becomes a marker for the mystery he has experienced.

But there is an even more profound transformation that takes place for Jacob. It is the part of the passage just beyond today's lectionary. Jacob does not just erect a marker and move on. His encounter with the living God has called forth from him a response. He takes the first tentative step towards claiming a faith for himself that had previously just been something his father handed down to him like a family recipe. He can't explain what has happened exactly, but he knows the terrain is different.

In response to this encounter he makes a vow. It is a vow that is particular to Jacob. He has not become a completely new creation in this sleepy encounter, for we know he still has angels in his future to wrestle. So, his vow is still grounded in his old ways. It is the vow of an adolescent faith, full of conditions. He says, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,"

While not the fully mature faith we will eventually see from Jacob it is the first step. It may not impress us as does the faith of Abraham. But Jacob's vow is closer to the ones I readily make. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac may be a more faithful position, but not one that I can easily see myself making. But hedging my bets, telling God how I think things should be ... that I understand.

One of Jacob's very gifts to us, is his unpleasantness, his obviously flaws, and his overt attempts to control God. How often do we find our prayers laden with our agenda for how we want things to turn out? How often do we promise to be more faithful if God resolves our current dilemma? The gift of Jacob is that he reminds us that what is powerful in this encounter is not his resume for holiness. What is powerful is the Great I Am, the living God.

It is often those people that we least expect to be vehicles of God's grace, that most demonstrate its power to us. Whether it is St. Paul's conversion from persecutor to champion, or an unexpected kindness from someone we are not terribly fond of, God's grace is beyond our human capacity to earn or even to give.

In Stephen Spielberg's 1993 film, *Schindler's List*, we meet one such unlikely saint. Oskar Schindler did not strike anyone as a likely protector or rescuer of over 1,200 persecuted Jews before the advent of the Second World War. A member of the Nazi party, at thirty one, he came to occupied Krakow hoping to capitalize on business opportunities and make his fortune. He was cunning and appeared at first to thrive in these surroundings. He took over a run-down enamelware factory, cleverly maneuvered his steps- acting upon the shrewd commercial advice of a Polish-Jewish accountant, Isaak Stern - and began to build himself a fortune.

Schindler enjoyed a lifestyle that included late night escapades, socializing with high ranking SS-officers, and philandering with beautiful Polish women. Schindler seemed to be no different from other Germans who had come to Poland as part of the occupation administration and their associates. Schindler never developed any ideologically motivated resistance against the Nazi regime. But he did allow the situation before him to penetrate his consciousness. He allowed Nazi persecution of the helpless Jewish population to bring about an unexpected transformation.

Gradually, his efforts to bring his Jewish workers safely through the war became the primary thrust of his life. He was not only prepared to squander all his money but also to put his own life on line. He used the privileged status his plant enjoyed to save Jewish employees threatened with deportation to Auschwitz. He did not balk at falsifying the records, listing children, housewives, and lawyers as expert mechanics and metalworkers, and, in general, covering up as much as he could for unqualified or temporarily incapacitated workers.

In the final days of the war, just before the entry of the Russian army into Moravia, Schindler managed to smuggle himself back into Germany, into Allied-controlled territory. The wartime industrial tycoon was by now penniless. When Schindler visited Israel in 1961, he was treated to an overwhelming welcome from 220 enthusiastic survivors. He continued to live partly in Israel and partly in Germany. After his death in Hildesheim, Germany, in October 1974, the mournful survivors brought the remains of their rescuer to Israel to be laid to eternal rest in the Catholic Cemetery of Jerusalem. The inscription on his grave says: "The unforgettable rescuer of 1,200 persecuted Jews".

That evolution from opportunist to rescuer did not come about overnight. It came about through the transformation that is wrought through the daily intersection of heaven and earth. Through the gradual yielding of our hard human failings to the transforming power of God's grace. Like Jacob, we are on a journey. It is a journey that takes us to unexpected places and finds us looking at God where we least expect it. It will invite us to release expectations of where God is and how God will work. And if we have the courage to sleep on a few hard pillows, who knows what we will see. Amen

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