

“Groaning Creation”

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Texts: Genesis 28: 10-19a and Romans 8: 26-39

Just a couple of verses before we begin our reading in Romans for today, the Apostle Paul shares the following: We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Of course I went to look up what groaning means. Google led me to this definition: the act of uttering a deep, prolonged sound expressing physical pain, emotional distress, or disapproval. I don't think it is a secret that much of creation, including humans—is groaning. Paul says we and creation groan inwardly, but I think we also are pretty good at groaning outwardly. Meanwhile, in Genesis, we come across Jacob. If you don't know Jacob, he has been the trickster (to put it nicely) and doesn't really exemplify who we think of when we think of the one called of God. And yet, in our story for today, here's Jacob meeting with God and creating an altar that would forever change a place. How could these stories be connected? What might they mean for our world today? For us?

I don't have to tell you where creation and its inhabitants are groaning. What people and places do you know of where groaning is occurring (discuss openly)? Does what is happening get in the way of your hope, your faith, your trust in others, even your trust in God (can answer if they want to, but more rhetorical)? For some of us, groans are personal, and

for others the groans are more universal. And I'm sure there are some that don't really see things all that bad.

No matter where you are on that spectrum, I think the Genesis story of Jacob can lead us to understand what desperation looks like. In our story, Jacob is fugitive from everyone he loves and who has loved him. He's on the run from his own actions, and from the trickery of others. And yet, in this same place, near Bethel, Jacob encounters the divine. Walter Brueggemann puts it this way, "[Jacob's encounter with the divine] occurs in a place Jacob would not expect a religious experience. It's not even a place whose name is known until this encounter. Jacob is now a fugitive outside all the protections of conventional meanings and social guarantees...the miracle is the way this sovereign God binds himself [sic] to this treacherous fugitive."

Brueggemann continues, "The event happens between places where nothing is expected. It happens between safe, identifiable places. Here everything is risky...the transformation takes place during sleep, when Jacob has lost control of his destiny." There's a lot to unpack there, so I'll read it again and give you a minute to digest all the meaning here. (pause)

On Tuesday of this past week, I had the opportunity to listen to the recording of a webinar called, "How Can We Reclaim Jesus from Empire" presented by the Center for Action and Contemplation. In the hour I learned many things, but of the comments that struck me the most came from Randy Woodley, "an activist, scholar, author, teacher, and wisdom keeper of mixed white and Native American heritage who speaks on justice, faith,

the earth, and Indigenous realities.” Randy is a new author to me, and I can’t wait to begin reading his book “What Christianity Got Wrong: Replacing the God of Fear with the Spirituality of Healing.” Perhaps we’ll use this for a book study later this summer or fall, but in the meantime, he got talking about salvation and its relationship to Jesus. He asked the question, “What if salvation is really found in healing?” We have been trained to think of salvation as something that protects us from God’s wrath. His point is, in the groaning world, what would a loving God really give to humanity that “saves” them? More on that later.

In the case of Jacob, God meets him in a dream. “The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness (and, we may imagine, unresolved guilt). Those were the parameters of his existence. The dream permits the entry of an alternative into his life. The dream is not a morbid review of a shameful past. It is rather the presentation of an alternative future with God. (Brueggemann).” I don’t know what all you groan under, but I might share a couple of those feelings. Further, we live in a society where both church and state seem to spend an enormous time trying to make us afraid. So, if nothing else, I think almost all of us share fear. And we spend a lot of time rehashing our shameful past—whatever that shame may be. Many of us worry that God does the same thing, keeping records of all our wrongs so they can be recited on that day where the big judgment comes. Meanwhile, we sabbily read from 1 Corinthians 13, “love keeps no record of wrong, but rejoices in the right.” So, is God loving or not?

The Jacob story, among many other biblical stories, convinces me that God is purely a God of love. Does mean that God doesn’t get angry, hurt, frustrated, sad...? Of course

not, remember, we are created in the image of the divine—including our emotions.

Brueggemann also reminds us that “the gospel moves to Jacob in a time when his guard is down.” Is your guard up? How often? When do you let your guard down? When are you okay with not being in control? Further, we are reminded that “Jacob had assumed that he traveled alone with his only purpose being survival. It was not hard then to conclude that divine reality was irrelevant.” That’s another one that deserves a pause.

How many of us feel we are traveling alone with our only purpose being survival? Talk about groaning! And if we are really that alone, then no wonder people don’t see the relevance of God, or community, or relationship with others important anymore. And they’ll listen to anyone who tells them that they have the answer for their survival. They are in it alone except for one savior—and often even though Jesus’ name is used, the savior they are talking about is not him. Desperate people can fall for just about anything.

Before moving on to Romans for a minute, I’d like to share a little more from Brueggemann’s commentary about Jacob. Funny how we think the Old Testament is irrelevant to our times and yet...” this text reminds us that God comes where God is not anticipated.” And perhaps most importantly for Jacob’s life and the lesson we might learn from it, “The appearance of God leads Jacob to make deep commitments and overriding decisions. The appearance does not leave Jacob free to be an interested spectator of some religious phenomenon.” The point is that there isn’t time for us to just be interested spectators.

I don't want to labor on about the Romans passage, but Paul Achtemeier in his commentary on that passage shared some thoughts that I believe dance beautifully with the Jacob story. I believe that much of our groaning has to do with our preoccupation with judgment. Judgment that comes from other people, and judgment we are TOLD comes from God, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Achtemeier reminds us that the Romans passage, "shows that the only ones who have the power to accuse or condemn us—God or [Jesus]—are in fact the very ones who protect us...Gone forever [is] the temptation to assume ill fortune is evidence of God's rejection of us! Banished once and for all the temptation to conclude that when things go badly, it means God has deserted us. God is for us. Nothing significant can therefore be against us." I'm not saying that we cannot ever groan, or be sad, or angry, or have doubt, or be down – or anything like that! Instead, I'm saying that God is for us in ways we will not believe. And yet how quickly do we believe that God is out to get us just like that person down the street, or Lansing, or Washington or anywhere else. We don't always see it, but God is at work.

"If no creature can separate us from God's love, then in the end even our own limitless ability to rebel against God is overcome; and we saved from our last and greatest enemy, ourselves." And if that is true, then maybe Woodley is correct that God is about salvation, but that salvation is really about healing.

God is at work in us, through us, sometimes even despite us. God is perfect love, and perfect love cannot abandon the creatures they create. And so it is that we called simply to believe that if Jacob can be redeemed, healed, released, redirected, reborn (if you will), then we can too. All of us. While humans find new ways to make ourselves and

others groan with extreme pain, God seeks to heal the broken in all of us. We have a lot to be afraid of in this world, it's true, but one of those things isn't supposed to be God. I wonder how much more good we could do if we stopped spending so much time looking for ways that God will "get" us and instead allow God to "get to" us and do for us what God did for Jacob.

People say (usually sarcastically) that life is a dream. But maybe life is found in places that are like dreams. Places where we let down our guard and in which we receive from a God who continues to seek our healing forever and always.

Amen.