

Sunday, July 17, 2011: Genesis 28:10-19a

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

You, Jacob—the one fleeing from that seriously peeved and smelly galoot of a brother (whose face will eventually resemble God's face). You rushed toward that as-yet-unmet sweet cousin of your mother. Your birthright was bought and paid for, your blessing slyly played for. Make no mistake. The Trickster will be tricked, for every round goes higher, higher. But you have to stop when the sun goes down—anyplace where you can camp, anyplace where you can find a big stone to place at your head and sleep like the dead.

The dream that you dreamed there has become our dream. Lying alongside you in that dark, nameless place, we see the steps of the ramp firmly set on the ground, with its top touching the sky. We see the uncanny messengers climbing the stairs, we see holy ones returning. Together we enter the REM-cycle theophany: Up on the ramp in the dream there's this God—saying THE NAME and making promises about soil and seed and security, blessing your family so that your family can bless all the families of the earth. It sounds like an opportunity; it also sounds like a terrible burden.

You wake with a start, filled with dread and the cloying reverberations of something like Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Surely the Lord is in this place, you stammer. We recognize your use of *surely* here. It is a common rhetorical device, uttered when no other explanation can be imagined, when we encounter the unexpected and risk spiraling into the maelstrom of it-can't-be but it-must-be. *Surely* does not make it so. There may be another explanation. But as your head clears and you return to your senses, you're still stuck in this place. Rationalizations fade and you are left with the overwhelming conviction that "the Lord is in this place—and I didn't know it."

How could you have known? There is no temple or shrine in this place, not even the ruins of an abandoned Canaanite sanctuary jutting out of the stony ground. No *temenos* wall delineating a sacred enclosure, no image or altar, no erstwhile grove of trees on a hillock marking liminal space where earth touches not-earth. No raggedy man of God about, no band of prophets tamborining themselves into an

oracular frenzy. None of the normal indications that would have disclosed to you: the Lord is in this place!

So what do you do with the fear and awe that grip you in the wake of such an encounter—when the senses are still buzzing, the synapses pinging? Wrestling your inner turmoil, you verbalize the only logical conclusion: this is an awe-inspiring place (*and I didn't know it*). With something like a J. L. Austin speech act, you shape your words into a reality and transform that no-place into a some-place. This awesome place, you now exclaim, must be a divine abode (*and I didn't know it*). This awesome place, you assert, is a gateway to heaven (*and I didn't know it*). Well, now you know, and now—in your saying—it is so.

You fall back into slumber. Still fleeing from your brother and rushing toward that wife (wives!), you wake the following morning into an altered reality. All that remains is to turn that pillow into a pillar, set up that very stone and anoint it with oil. On that place, the place that was Luz, the place that would someday become quite the place, you bestow the name Bethel.

Religion makes its home in the church sanctuary. To cross its threshold is to enter a domain of limitless possibilities. To the believer in us it's a second home. To the seeker in us it's a place of refuge. To the doubter and the worrier and the loser it's the reception hall of the redeemed. The very demarcation of the sanctuary creates the world outside its precinct. The keeping of sabbath renders ordinary time comprehensible and meaningful. We expect God to be in that place. We walk in entertaining the possibility that the fullness of our existence, distilled to its essence, is within our grasp.

Often the church has turned this gateway to heaven into a bulwark of exclusion. Often we mistake the shrine for what is enshrined there, or desecrate the foundations of the sacred in our midst. Nevertheless, we keep returning to those places where God has been and may yet be, where grace has been received and may yet be bestowed, where the broken, sinful, wounded community gathers and may yet be renewed. It is where we come to meet our Maker.

The patriarch Jacob reminds us that God is not confined to the sanctuary—not only in the sense that the Creator may seem manifest "out there" in earthquake, wind and fire (to say nothing of sheer silence)—but in places where there are no saints and sinners hanging around, no clergy, no praying, no singing, no sacrificing—no

healing, no liberating, no exorcising, no saving—no crosses, no steeples, no domes, no billboards, no images, no signage whatsoever—none of the normal indications that demurely or shrilly proclaim: the Lord is in this place. There too God may choose to meet us. Whether or not we are in search of God, as Abraham Joshua Heschel says, God is in search of us.

We know where the Lord hangs out, normally. We know when the Lord appears, traditionally. We know what the Lord wants. But that the Lord is in this place, at this time, in these circumstances—that we did not know. Thanks, Jacob.