

Braving the Wilderness *The Wild Within*

Genesis 28:10-19a

March 10, 2024

"This is how life goes—we send our children into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they are born, it seems, for all the help we can give them. Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves." I love these words from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*. They are written in the voice of an aging pastor writing a letter to his seven-year-old son. Some of them are a wilderness unto themselves. I think we know what the pastor means.

Jacob. He is a man on the run. He's been a conniver since the day he was born, born clinging to his brother's heel. He convinces his famished elder brother Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of homemade stew. And that's bad enough, but this time Jacob has gone too far. You see, a father's blessing was a big deal in the ancient world. And irrevocable. By impersonating Esau, Jacob fooled their elderly father Isaac into giving *him* the blessing intended solely for the firstborn son—that's Esau. And so, we're talking family drama in the extreme, and now Jacob is in serious danger. Rebekah warns her favorite son that Esau plans to console himself by killing his brother Jacob. And so, with his mother's help, Jacob flees home. His only aim at this point is to survive. That's where we find Jacob this morning—on the run, not only from his brother but from God as well. At least, that is what he thinks.

A safe distance away and exhausted from the rapid retreat, Jacob finds a stone pillow (that sounds like an oxymoron to me, but that's what it says), and there on that rock, he closes his eyes to rest. And that's when the unexpected happens—the very God from whom he is running shows up. And, even more surprising, this God speaks to a broken and terrified young man. The divine words show no sign of anger or judgement,

no resentment or rejection. Just the opposite. At the very lowest point of Jacob's life, God climbs down into the depths of Jacob's despair and makes a promise. "Remember, I am with you...I will not leave you."

With this voice still ringing in his ears, Jacob wakes up. And please note that nothing around him has changed—the same dusty wilderness, the same stone pillow, perhaps more importantly the same dire and deadly circumstances. It's all the same, and yet, for Jacob, it's all different now. We know this because of what he says and because of what he does. He speaks out loud, as if there is someone who can hear his words in this deserted place, "Surely the Lord is here—and I didn't know it!" Didn't know it? You hoped it *wasn't true!* And then he turns that pillow into a pillar, rooted in the earth and pointing toward heaven, and he gives that place a name. Bethel. The house of God.

In her wonderful book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The first time I read Jacob's story in the Bible, I knew that it was true whether it ever happened or not." I think she's right about that. Jacob's story is *true*, true in the deepest sense of that word. True to our experience. True to the realities of life. Family dramas. Estrangement. Isolation. Fear. Despair. Jacob is all alone in that deserted place in the middle of the wilderness. He is filled with fear and uncertainty, and as he examines the trajectory of his life to this point, surely he wonders, "Will I survive? And do I even want to? Is there any purpose left for me to pursue? Have I finally squandered the gift of this life before I even had a chance to live it?" Isolated and estranged, he must have questioned, "Can anyone, even God, love me now?"

If these are the queries that occupy his troubled soul, the answers do not arrive in the abstraction of ideas or

the rigidity of laws. *Believe this and you will be loved. Do that and you can be forgiven.* No, no, no. Instead, God just shows up. God enters the wilderness. This too is true, that God climbs into your deepest despair. This too is true, that God meets us in the wild within us, even when we are a wilderness unto ourselves. What God offers Jacob is no detailed plan or an intricate proposal. There is no escape route from his brother's wrath. God offers presence. I will not leave you. The promise of that divine presence is both unconditional and utterly unrestricted. Bound neither by Jacob's past sinfulness or by the trappings of religiosity we humans construct.

When you are on the run from God, from an estranged loved one, from yourself, what you need is not a roadmap or a to do list because the wilderness is not *out there*. The wilderness is *in here*. What you need is an experience of holiness. What you require is the promise that you are loved. What transforms Jacob in this morning's story is not some lesson learned or training received—it is an unexpected encounter with a holy God. God, who meets this troubled trickster in the wilderness. The wilderness within.

This story boldly proclaims that the presence of God is not limited to the places we construct or the time we set aside to acknowledge it. Jacob named the place House of God, not because he built a temple but because God found him there.

And so, I wonder, have you experienced the presence of God in an unexpected place? Or an unusual time? Sometimes, those places are physical. Perhaps you've experienced the presence of God in a hospital room, or on a long car ride, or at a neighbor's table, or a public place. But often they are the wild places within us. The places we most hesitate to go, the depths of our souls we avoid. We find God in a place of grief or a time of deep sadness. We experience God in our anger at injustice. We discover God's presence when we are most aware of our own brokenness. God meets us when we've stopped looking for God. *Surely the Lord is in this place...and I didn't know it!* You see, the wonder of worship is that it happens anywhere

God shows up, any time we still ourselves long enough to see.

So. You. You who are running from a past you cannot change. You who have stopped believing in a love strong enough to hold your broken spirit. You who are filled with fear for the future. You who wonder if it can ever be different. You who are weary and heavily burdened. You for whom God has seemed so distant for so long. You who need the comfort of a simple promise. Listen. Here it is. You are loved by the one who knows you to the deepest places of your heart. You are held by a power beyond your imagination and a strength that vanquishes all your fear. You are precious in the sight of the one who created you. Do not go in search for God. Do not run away from God. Stay right here in those places of uncertainty and fear, and let God come to you in the wilderness within.

Today, our younger son Benjamin turns seven years old. I am not ready to release him into the wilderness. Never will be. But that's what we'll do. We'll do it time and time again. Wilderness after wilderness. The same is true for all of us. No choice in that. So, here is what I want my son to know, and you can listen as well. Benjamin, you never have to run away from God, or from me. Because that's what unconditional love means. I will not leave you. The wild places within you belong to God. They are filled with a beauty only God can fully see. The promise is true. God will not leave you. When we stop running and quit hiding, God will meet us where we are. And that encounter will not be filled with fear or wrath or punishment or resentment or anger. It will be grace. It will be grace. All grace. Always grace. Grace washing over us. Grace filling us up. Grace enough to carry on and some to give way.

Because, believe this, God is not distant. Invited or not, expected or unforeseen, the Lord is in this place, and in every place where we find our hearts encouraged and our souls lifted up. That ancient dream showed Jacob something he could never discover on his own: that God climbs down. God met him where he was. Jacob slept in Bethel. He lived in God's house. And so do you. Amen.