

Never Alone
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Genesis 28:10-19a (15)

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel;

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 (7-10)

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” begins the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. While not part of our reading today, it certainly speaks to the task at hand, to the promise God offers in our readings. Both the words of God in Genesis and the words of the psalmist speak of a God of care and love and promises. God tells Jacob through his dream that “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” The psalmist recounts God’s intimate knowledge of us, down to the very mundane: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.” This same psalm speaks the words that God knits us together in our mothers’ wombs. This God knows us cell by cell, thought by thought, breath by breath; intimately and deeply we are known. This being known is the reason we crave family relationships, why we seek out others with similar interests, passions, faith. We were made to be in community and to be in community, really be in communion with others, we must let others know us.

Our God is so close at hand, at each of our hands, to be almost claustrophobic. “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” God stays close. Just as many babies rest easily when they are swaddled snugly, comforted by being wrapped closely as they were in the womb, we, too, can take comfort in a God who is so close as to touch us.

But what if you have something in your past, or even your present, that you wish to turn your back on and hide from, that you wish to hide from God, that you wish to forget, something of which you are ashamed or regretful or even horrified? The God who knows everything you do and everything you will do, who sees all you have done, this God knows of this very thing on your mind and you cannot hide it or yourself. Not only might you carry guilt but you must also live knowing that God knows about it, too. This idea is far from comforting, perhaps even discomfoting. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” The psalmist says to God, “you are in the farthest, most remote places I can imagine and you are even there. There are times I want to hide but even then I cannot.”

You may run away, literally or figuratively, from the things that have caused you pain or shame. You may isolate yourself for fear of hurting people more or being hurt more yourself. You may cut off all the people who care about you, even those who know your truths, maybe even especially those who

know your truths, for they serve as a reminder of that which you would rather forget. And it may work here on earth, making yourself alone in the eyes of your fellow humankind but you cannot succeed in being completely alone, for God is with you still.

The feelings of shame and guilt and wanting to hide do not afflict only people like you or like me or even the psalmist; Martin Luther, not quite the father of our faith, more like the great-uncle of our faith, suffered for many years weighed down by guilt for the things he had done and for the things he had left undone. He would go and offer confession multiple times a day, leaving the confessional feeling absolved only to do something soon after, whether on purpose or accidentally, that brought him back to his sinful state and to feeling the need to offer confession yet again. In this way he tormented himself; this pattern carried on for years until he had a revelation. God gave his only son so that we might realize our good deeds, no matter how few or numerous, do not earn us salvation; salvation is a “free gift of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ as redeemer from sin.”¹ In Luther’s own words, “people can learn to find comfort in God’s grace and not in their own contrition, confession, and satisfaction.”²

And so, no matter what weighs you down, God both knows you AND loves you. God knows those things you wish you could take back or undo and God loves you, even when you do not love yourself. What good news is this?! When we are at our lowest, when we feel unlovable, maybe even when others are affirming that thought, God is loving us. We are each still accountable for our actions and our choices. Just as parents do, God disapproves of our choices to turn away yet God’s love does not change because of disappointment. God’s judgment does not negate God’s grace; in fact, God’s grace only becomes sweeter in light of God’s judgment. Where others might turn away from us, God stands firmly at our sides, offering a comforting embrace. Where others might reject us or be too hurt to consider forgiveness, God offers both forgiveness and mercy. As if that were not good enough, God does something even more amazing. God works good from bad, whether it be ours or others’.

The psalmist says, “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for the darkness is as light to you.” If God could bring forth light from darkness in creation, surely God can also bring light from our dark moments, our dark times. And God is always present doing just that. In Jacob’s dream, God promises Jacob that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.” As adopted children of Israel, we are part of that promise; we are to be a blessing to others.

When we come to God in confession at the beginning of each worship service, we do so with confidence in a forgiveness already offered. There is nothing to fear. Where we might fear rejection by

¹ *Wikipedia*, 16 July 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther.

² 16 July 2011, <http://lutherantheology.wordpress.com/2008/08/24/luther-confession/>.

others or harsh words or reprimands or our own shame for the things we have done, with God, there is nothing to fear. God knows us. God has searched us and God knows us. And God still does not leave us alone. We have nothing to fear; we are still God's and God is still with us. As the psalm says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it." Our understanding of God is limited to our human minds and our human experiences. God is so much greater than we can ever imagine or describe, so much kinder than even the kindest person we know, so full of love that there is no hate. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us! Such knowledge is so high that we cannot attain it, that we cannot comprehend it fully. What we can know with confidence is that through Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we have nothing to fear. We are freed to speak with a sense of peace the words of the psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

What better way for us to be blessings to others than to follow in God's way everlasting? Will we come short? Undoubtedly. Will there be people to whom we are more of a curse than a blessing? Quite possibly. Will we forsake God and deny Christ and ignore the Spirit? Yes, yes, and yes. Will God know when that happens? Absolutely. None of that negates God's promise to love us. Through Christ's death and resurrection, God make a new promise, a new covenant, that we are forgiven, that we will not be given over to death, and that we will be reunited with God once again. Remember, God's word to Jacob is a word to us, too. "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go...for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised." If God's promise is to reunite us and God will be with us until that promise is fulfilled, then God is always with us. Take comfort that you are never alone. Face the things you are ashamed of, knowing God loves you through your pain. And hold close the words of the apostle Paul from his letter to the Romans: "...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." I would add, "nothing we do or fail to do, no matter who we are, is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Such knowledge, my friends, is too wonderful!

Let us pray: Search us, O God, and know our hearts; test us and know our thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting. Amen.