

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church

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“The Landscape of the Soul”

third in the series, “Learning to See”

Genesis 28:10-17

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I went to college on the edge of the Ozarks in southwest Missouri... which you all know is a beautiful place with trees, and rivers, and cliffs, and lakes. I love the Ozarks.

But then, I moved to Waco, Texas for seminary. My first impression of Texas was just how ugly it is. Waco in particular, is a pretty poor, dumpy town and the landscape of central Texas is dry, and hot, with a semi-arid climate, and with gnarly trees, and scrubby shrubs. It was a bit depressing that first year.

In college, back in Southwest Missouri, I was used to being able to lay down on the lush green grass in the middle of campus and soak up the sun. But in Texas, whenever I tried to lie down on the grass... fire ants would start attacking.

Quickly I learned my first spiritual truth while being in seminary: ***Texas is...demonic.***

While there, Jessi and I became close friends with a couple who were also new to Texas. They were from northern Wisconsin where there are beautiful summers, pine forests, and stunning snow. My friend Josh was also convinced that Texas was Satan’s territory, because to him every August felt like you were living in the fires of hell.

So, he and I took every chance we got to tell Texans just how awful their state was. Now, if you know anything about Texans, you know they have ***too much*** pride in their state. It’s actually kind of weird. So, let’s just say, our truth telling about the woes of living in Texas weren’t well received.

In fact, one native Texan was always trying to convince me otherwise. “What about the hill country of Central Texas?” he’d say. “Look at those live oaks! You don’t have those in Missouri.”

And he is right. For those of you that don’t know, live oaks are very different kinds of trees than the pin oaks and white oaks we have around here.

Their leaves are much smaller, and more round and more numerous. They grow very slow and creepy... and gnarly... with arms twisted and bent... like what you’d ***see in a horror movie!***

His beautiful trees are ***the trees of my nightmares.***

So, it took me awhile, after several years of living there, to begin to see it. There is a beauty, and an age, and a wisdom, and a character to those trees that we just don’t have here in Missouri, and my friend Josh doesn’t have in Wisconsin.

And it’s not just the live oaks, really. The longer I lived in Waco, the more I had to admit how beautiful it was...places I hadn’t noticed before.

The landscape... is fundamentally different than anything I had known before. But it has its own sacred shapes and contours.

Which takes us back to your soul. The landscape of your soul is most certainly unique. It may be full of twisted, gnarly trees or flowing Ozark streams.

It may be semi-arid or packed with the cold and snow of the northern woods. ***But there, in the landscape of your own soul, is exactly the place... where God can be found.***

It's a strange mystery for us, but saints again and again across the ages have discovered and described the same reality. Hidden there, in the contours of your soul, in the longings...
in the desires...

in the restlessness...

"is the house of God, the gate of heaven." to use Jacob's words.

And on one very important level, that's what this story from Genesis 28 is trying to tell us.

This moment comes midway in Jacob's adult life. He's not met Rachel and Leah yet, but he's at least in his 40's.

He's manipulated his twin brother Esau,
deceived his dying daddy, Isaac,
and stolen the family birthright.

Esau is threatening his life, and so mamma Rebekah sends Jacob away.

Jacob's on the run.

He's headed to some distant relative that he's never met.

He is alone. And he's got a whole lot of nothing with him.

No supplies, no tent, no sleeping bag... nothing to lay his head on but some stone he finds on the ground.

After all those years of scheming and planning and manipulating... trying to get out on top, this is where he ends up.

You see, as he lays his head on that hard pillow, he hits rock bottom.

He falls asleep with his life in shambles;
his soul restless and churning...

And ***out of that churning, he has this dream where***...he sees what has really been there all along.

It's a dream of the ladder going to heaven... with angels ascending and descending.

It's a dream...about a passageway.

An opening to the Divine.

A connection to the place of God.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, as he sees this, he realizes that God is there. Right there, next to Jacob, speaking, revealing blessings.

"I am the God of Abraham and Isaac. The God of your fathers."

"Know that I am with you."

"I will keep you wherever you go."

"I am with you."

As best as I can tell, this is the first real encounter Jacob has with God. He's probably heard his parents talk about God. Maybe he's even thought about this God off and on. But this is different. For the first time, Jacob ***encounters*** a personal presence.

And the encounter bubbles out of the churning of the landscape of his own soul. So that when he awakes he says,

“Surely the Lord is in the place—and I did not know it!”

Now of course, on the surface he is talking about this particular geographic location... the landscape he sees before him. In fact, he takes his rock and anoints it with oil, and marks this as a holy place by naming it Bethel, which means, “The house of God.”

And this place, Bethel, becomes an important place throughout the story of the Old Testament. It comes up again and again. It continues to be recognized as a holy place, a place where you can come and encounter God.

But along the way the prophets begin to criticize Bethel and all that it represents. Because, as the generations pass... a shift begins to happen... a shift from Bethel being this place where the soul is awakened to God... to a place that is defined by rituals and expectations and obligations...

In other words, *the soul encounter is lost*...

And when that happens, the meaning of Jacob’s words are lost.

So, when Jacob says, “Surely the Lord is in this place” he is describing a reality that is about more than the rocks and the hard ground around him...

He is naming something... about the landscape... of the soul, the rock and the hard place within him.

The *place* of wrestling and longing.

The *place* that most often feels unsettled.

A place of desire and passion and dryness within you.

The landscape of the soul... is the place where there *is* a hidden ladder, an unknown opening to God.

And in a rare moment of grace you might suddenly realize that God is there, speaking, revealing, blessing.

A couple of weeks ago, I was running in Queeny Park, just a few miles from here. And when I run, I like to listen to podcasts because it gives me something to think about other than the fact that I want to stop running!

Lately, I’ve been listening to episodes of *On Being*. And on this particular day I was listening to an interview with John O. Donohue, an Irish/Celtic writer, poet, and philosopher.

And halfway through the interview, Donohue mentioned that what he loves about Christianity... and where it differs from other religious traditions, is that at the heart of Christianity we have this idea of *intimacy*...

intimacy with God...which he says, “is true belonging, being seen, the ultimate home of individuation,” in other words, the ultimate place of being personally, individually known.

And then he referenced St. Augustine’s phrase,

“God is more intimate to me, than I am to myself.”

“God is more intimate to me, than I am to myself.”

God is more present to my soul, than even I am. How is that possible, unless God abides deep in the mystery of your soul?

Countless others discover the same reality. Hundreds of years after Augustine, in the middle ages, a German Mystic named **Meister Eckhart** writes, "I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself."

There, in the landscape of the soul... is the home of God.

And all the longings of the soul... are ultimately a longing for God... a longing to know *the God who has already struck you with the wound of love.*

That's how **St. John of the Cross** describes it.

St. John of the Cross says that we have been "wounded" by God.

You remember what it is like to be wounded by love, to feel "love-sick"?

...to wonder when you'll see your beloved again?

That's what my college graduation day was like. I remember it well.

Over the last two years of college, Jessi and I had flirted, and dated, and broken up, and dated again. And finally, just a few weeks before graduation... I told her something I had never told another woman before. I said those three sacred words: "I love you."

And I meant it.

And I finally knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

But on graduation day... everything was changing. You see, her older sister was also graduating from college that day...but from a different school. And she had to leave early that morning... and her leaving was the beginning of a long, uncertain separation.

I was headed to Mexico for the summer and then moving to Texas to start seminary in the fall. And she wasn't coming with me. She still had 2 years of school left here in Missouri.

I didn't know how things were all going to come together, but I knew it was the beginning of everything changing. It was the beginning of not seeing her... for who knows how long.

And my heart was aching... This woman I loved wasn't going to be part of my daily life...anymore...for a long... long time.

So, early that morning, we met one another for breakfast at a local restaurant...

And after we had breakfast, we said goodbye and I stood there watching her drive away... wondering when I'd see her again... as tears filled my eyes, and my heart ached.

That's what John of the Cross is describing when he says we've been wounded by God. It is the wound of love.

That's where the longing you've experienced in your life comes from.

That's what the restlessness comes from.

Our souls have been wounded by God's love...

And now, your soul is longing for her beloved...

wondering when she will rest in the embrace of her lover again.

And your spiritual life... is essentially... what you do with that longing. Because we tend to do all kinds of things with that... some good, some not so good... but often misdirected.

We take that longing and throw it into our careers...trying to be more and more successful.

... Or we live out that longing by chasing another relationship, or experience, or adventure
... we live it out by trying to find meaning by fixing the world...
... we live it out by trying to be good... in countless ways.

Jacob? Jacob lived out his longings and desires by trying to top his brother to get ahead, and to do that he manipulated his loved ones...by tricking and scheming...

All of it is part of his spirituality.

All of it is a life being lived from a restlessness... a longing for something more... a longing that comes from being wounded by God's deep love.

And in the moments when all that longing and restlessness comes to the surface... like when we've hit rock bottom,

or when we've failed miserably,
or experience some kind of loss...

or when there's just not enough to make us happy anymore...

it's in those moments of longing *that our soul is trying to say to us*, "What you keep looking for is God, and you keep looking for it outside of yourself when all this time God has been hiding deep within."

Jacob falls asleep, and out of the landscape of his soul, there is an opening to the Divine Presence. A ladder that reaches into the heavens. And when he awakes he knows what he didn't know before. He sees what he couldn't see before, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

It's not surprising that he hadn't seen it, really. No one would have guessed it about **Jacob**. From the outside, the landscape of his life looks pretty arid, and gnarly, and dry.

But the good news is that God doesn't hang out in pristine landscapes. God is there in the unique beauty, and tragedy, and cracks, and crevices of your soul.

So, if you want to **see** God...

if you want to **know** God...

learn to listen to your longings...

Allow them to lead you inward...

Allow them to carry you deeper and deeper into the **wild landscape** of your soul... until you glimpse the place within where God is hidden.

And there... for a moment...

find rest in the arms of your Beloved.

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

*"The bride has entered the sweet garden of her desire,
and she rests in delight,
laying her neck
on the gentle arms of her Beloved."*

~John of the Cross.