

July 23, 2017  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant  
“Behind the Curtain”  
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### **Genesis 28:10–19a**

<sup>10</sup>Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup>He 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. <sup>12</sup>And 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. <sup>13</sup>And 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; <sup>14</sup>and 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. <sup>15</sup>Know 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.”

<sup>16</sup>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” <sup>17</sup>And 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.” <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

### **John 1:43–51**

<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” <sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” <sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” <sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” <sup>50</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” <sup>51</sup>And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

*“Behind the Curtain”*  
*Genesis 28:10–19; John 1:43–51*

My friend Audrey is the daughter of parents who immigrated to the US from China. She grew up Buddhist, but didn’t really consider herself religious. Then, in medical school, she met and married a man whose father and three sisters were all Presbyterian ministers. Audrey was intrigued by their commitment to social justice and the way faith informed the lives and actions of her husband’s family. Eventually, Audrey was baptized and joined a church. Within just a few years, she was asked to serve on session, which is what we call the leadership of a Presbyterian church. Audrey accepted, and felt a deep sense of call and responsibility as she assumed this position. At the first meeting, she arrived ready to discern with her fellow elders how God was calling them as individuals and as a church to be faithful disciples. Imagine Audrey’s dismay and disappointment when the majority of the meeting involved a heated discussion over whether to continue serving cookies during coffee hour after worship.

In his new book *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*, Brian McLaren observes that when the Christian faith emerged over two thousand years ago, it introduced new beliefs into human consciousness that liberated millions from outdated and oppressive systems. But now, thousands of years later, Christianity has become an established system, making it more like a leash or a locked door impeding growth instead of a force for liberation and transformation.<sup>1</sup>

One way to respond to the reality McLaren names is to become cynical. A recent Gallup poll shows that from 2000 to 2016, the percentage of Americans identifying with a specific Protestant denomination went from 50 to 30.<sup>2</sup> At least in part, this represents the people who are tired of churches that seem more interested in arguing over right and wrong – or over what to serve at coffee hour – than about what it looks like to follow Jesus, so they assume the whole enterprise is fatally flawed and decide not to bother with any of it. Someone once said that a cynic is a person who started out as an idealist, but now has

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<sup>1</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (Convergent: 2016), 41-42. Quoted in Richard Rohr’s daily evotional on Monday, July 17, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.gallup.com/poll/214208/protestants-no-specific-denominational-identity.aspx?utm\\_source=alert&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=morelink&utm\\_campaign=syndication](http://www.gallup.com/poll/214208/protestants-no-specific-denominational-identity.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_content=morelink&utm_campaign=syndication)

seen it all – and doesn't like any of it!<sup>3</sup> Although most of us can probably relate to the progression from idealist to cynic – whether we become cynical about the church, or politics, or family, or country – the story of Jacob shows us someone who undergoes a different progression.

Jacob didn't start out as an idealist. He was born a cynic. Fighting with his twin brother Esau even while in the womb, Jacob – as we saw last week – wastes little time finding ways to blow off the established customs of his day. First, he tricks Esau out of his birthright. Then he deceives their father Isaac to receive the blessing that also should have gone to Esau. His cynicism is such that he leaves nothing to chance or even to the hope that maybe he and his brother could work together to come up with a more equitable arrangement. He lies, cheats, and steals to come out on top.

The downside of this strategy is that it leaves his brother in a murderous rage. Ironically, after Jacob steals the birthright and blessing that would make him the owner of the family estate after Isaac's death, he has created so much ill will in the process that the only way for him to stay alive is to run away, back to the country from which his grandfather Abraham and mother Rebekah came. This is the journey Jacob is on when he finally puts enough distance between himself and his pursuers to lie down and sleep.

When Jacob is awake, his reality is one of fear and conflict, striving and loneliness, and deep-seated cynicism. But when he goes to sleep that night in the wilderness, God shows Jacob a different reality, a reality that reveals how much more is going on in the world than Jacob has dared to imagine, a reality that offers Jacob not punishment or curse for his dishonest ways, but a blessing that Jacob didn't even know was possible: the blessing of God's presence with him and God's intimate involvement in his life.<sup>4</sup>

What Jacob sees in his dream is variously described as a ladder or a staircase or a ramp, but whatever it is, it provides a means of travel between the spiritual realm of God and the natural realm of humanity. It shows Jacob that, for God at least, the boundary between these two realms is completely porous. Jacob's vision is, as one writer puts it, "God's startling and clear reminder that earth is not left on its own and that heaven isn't closed off for the gods. Heaven is not just connected to, but also very interested in the earth."

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Ramsey, "Does Goliath Ever Really Lose?" sermon delivered at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX, July 16, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. John Knox, 1982.

We live in a time where cynicism is not only tempting, sometimes it seems like the only sane response to the state of our world:

- an iceberg the size of Delaware just broke off an ice shelf in Antarctica.
- Jesus Lara Lopez, a hardworking, taxpaying resident of Ohio for 16 years and father of four, was separated from his family and deported back to Mexico last week, in spite of religious groups and political leaders who pleaded his case.
- Senators just spent months in a closed room, without one woman or minority of any kind at the table, attempting to draft a whole new health care plan .

Cynicism is an understandable response to the times we live in. The problem is that cynicism, tempting as it is, turns us into people who can't be bothered with complicated theological concepts like forgiveness and mercy and justice. It turns us into people like Nathaniel, who, when he heard from his friend Philip that there was a new rabbi in town who was truly special, rolled his eyes and waxed sarcastic: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip's response is simply this: come and see. Come and see for yourself. It is an invitation that even cynical Nathaniel won't turn down, and when he does come and see Jesus, something about him – his sincerity, his charisma? the text doesn't say – but something breaks through Nathaniel's brittle shell of cynicism. It is as if, when he sees Jesus, Nathaniel catches a glimpse of what Jacob saw in his vision –God, intimately involved with the things and people of this earth.

According to Brian McLaren, cynicism isn't the only response to the way Christianity, over the last two thousand years, has become increasingly systematized and institutionalized. A different response than cynicism is for those of us who have caught a glimpse of God's intimate care for and involvement in our world to do what we can to *transform the church*, to communicate more clearly to those who have given up on Christianity that ours is a way of life *defined by the love and mercy that defined Jesus' life*. We can invite them to *come and see*, and show them something entirely different than they have come to expect.

In her travels around the country, pastor and writer Lillian Daniel talks to a lot of people who haven't been able to find for themselves a church like the ones she describes: churches that are open, inclusive, progressive, relevant.

Usually, she digs a little deeper by asking a few pointed questions like, how long have you been looking for a church and how many churches have you visited and how long did you attend before deciding it wasn't right for you? The answers to these questions usually reveal that the people who complain the most about the church haven't been to a church in a decade or more and when they did go, they visited *a couple of churches a couple of times*. Having spent her professional life in the church, Lillian has learned that **finding and staying in a church is never a simple process**. It requires hard work and commitment. *Faith is a serious and complicated thing*, and committing to a faith community is a **serious and complicated** process.

One day, Lillian was talking to a Canadian radio host after an interview. He wanted to know how he could find a church like the ones she talked about. So she started down her usual list of questions: "have you visited a church lately...how many...for how long" and to her surprise he did not give the answers she had come to expect. In the last few years, he had visited all twenty-one churches in his small town, multiple times each. Lillian was confused. Was there really something wrong with *all* of these churches? Was there not even *one* that he liked? Or were his standards just too high? "Oh, it wasn't that," he replied. "I liked a lot about all of them. It's just that they wouldn't like me. I've done bad things in my life. I don't belong with those people." "Didn't they say God loves you despite all that?" Lillian asked. "Sure," he said. "They all **say** that. But **I don't think I believe it**...if they knew me, or what I think, *they wouldn't want me there*." Somewhere along the way, this man learned that churches are places anyone can visit, but only incognito. If they knew who you really were, they'd kick you out. He did not believe – nor had he found a church whose people clearly communicated that they believed – that *church is a place where you can come to be real*.<sup>5</sup>

That church is a place you can bring your **cynical, lying, selfish, stingy self** as well as your **sincere, giving, generous, accepting self**, and hear that *God loves you just the way you are and too much to leave you that way*, even if your transformation only happens in the tiniest increments and takes your whole life long, just like it will for Jacob. When we read the stories of our ancestors in the Bible, we encounter people – like Jacob and Nathaniel – who often seem to be way more cynical, lying, selfish, and stingy than they are

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<sup>5</sup> Lillian Daniel, *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To: Spirituality Without Stereotypes, Religion Without Ranting*. FaithWords, 2017.

sincere, giving, generous, and accepting. And **God receives all of them** with mercy and compassion rather than judgment and punishment. *If we modeled our churches after on a faith in that kind of God, what would they look like?*

After Jacob had this vision of the astonishing connection between heaven and earth, after God stood right beside him and said that, in spite of everything Jacob had done and maybe even because of it too, God blessed him and would always be with him, after all this, Jacob turned his resting place into a place of worship, a place that would forever be a reminder that he had learned something here about who God is and who he was that he could **never** unlearn or forget. That is what sanctuaries were originally designed to be, of course. **Sanctuaries are places we come to remember and reorient our lives** to the truth of God's unconditional **love** and **presence**...and where we *lay down our cynicism* and accept the serious and complicated responsibility of joining God's work in the world.

Jacob's vision **transforms** him. This glimpse of God's love and engagement with the world **changes** him. Oh, he's still the same crooked Jacob (as we will soon see), but he loses much of his cynicism that night. We know this because in the next installment of his story, Jacob falls in love, and cynics cannot truly love. Cynicism comes when we take the world at face value – when Jacob fights for every scrap of his family's material wealth and when Philip is certain that nothing good comes from Nazareth because nothing good ever has. **Love** comes when we dare to believe *there is more going on than what we can see*, when we choose to see ourselves and others through eyes of **mercy**, not judgment.

Christianity stands on the brink of a transformative moment, at the threshold of a new reformation. This moment requires us – we who love and are committed to Christ's church – to embrace **sincerity, vulnerability, and authenticity** – with God and with each other – and most of all, to **orient** our lives and our actions, as Jesus always did, around *love*. This is how we reveal to those who have given up on religion that *God has not and will not ever give up on any of us*. In the midst of all the brokenness of this world, in the messes we make of our lives, God is there, transforming it all with the power of mercy and love.

Amen.