

Proper 11A, Genesis 28.10-19a

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On a recent trip to the Hudson Valley to visit our daughter, our son and his fiancé drove up from Richmond, and we all went camping in the Catskills. As camping trips go, it was fairly uneventful and relatively comfortable. We didn't have to set up or break down the tent in the rain that blew in and back out that night. And we were secretly glad that Alden and Hannah's nervous dog Romeo chose their heads to lie down on when the thunder rolled in in the middle of the night.

A few days before our trip, two guys known as "The Dumb Dads" on Instagram held a faux press conference on the joys of family camping. Near the end, a reporter asks, "What's your focus now?" To which Dad #2 replies, "You know, after living in the dirt for three days, everybody just kinda smells like bug spray and smoke. We ate a bunch of wet food because our cooler stinks. Nothing fits in the container you brought it in. So, we're just looking forward to getting home to some screen time and showers." The reporter follows up, "Will you go camping again this summer?" "Oh sure, we love camping!" says the dad.

Camping is a curious activity. A completely mystifying one to a lot of people. It's a chosen form of discomfort that often involves gear that's more expensive than what we use in our cushier indoor lives. But whether you like to camp or garden or jog or bake bread or, honestly, just enter into any but the most superficial of human relationships, there's going to be an element of discomfort, possibly even pain and anxiety involved. Such is life for creatures like us in a world like this one, it seems. Maybe camping is just one way to practice accepting that there's just no perfectly comfortable way to be alive.

"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 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..." Anybody else notice that Jacob really raises the bar for roughing it as he turns in for the night? A night in which he will have one of the most famous and beautiful dreams ever dreamt?

If we know the story of this dreamer, we might expect him to have not just an uncomfortable sleep on that rock, but an anxious dream as his guilty subconscious works out the mess he's made of things. You see, Jacob wasn't just out to commune with nature. He was on the lam, because he had swindled the birthright from his older brother Esau. In a moment of weakness, you'll remember, Esau had traded it for a bowl of stew. But it took an elaborate scheme to deceive blind old father Isaac for Jacob to

finally secure the blessing for good. Esau was so angry he swore to kill his brother. So Jacob takes the stolen blessing and runs.

This is the context for Jacob's dream. And even if he cared nothing for severing his relationship with his brother, was the blessing that Isaac's lineage would continue through Jacob really worth having to live the rest of his days sleeping with one eye open and looking over his shoulder, lest his brother catch up to him and take his revenge?

I don't think we need to psychoanalyze Jacob's dream to assume that there is plenty of anxiety and discomfort present in the scene, even if the dream itself seems so much more beautiful than what this scoundrel deserves. Perhaps the fact that he's spent the night with his head on a rock is the story's reminder that even Jacob, who seems to have a conscience of stone, has more going on in his life than blessings and beautiful visions. And some part of him knows it, even if he doesn't quite know how to live differently from the grasping and conniving he's been up to since he came into this world clutching his twin brother's heel.

Our stories are complicated, aren't they? Other people's stories are complicated, aren't they? Sometimes it seems like people who deserve to be miserable for all the pain they've caused sleep like milk-drunk babies while earnest do-gooders toss and turn for everything else they might have done or said to make the world a little better, but didn't.

Well, for some reason it helped me, as I heard this story for the umpteenth time, to have been reading a Benedictine monk named David Stendl-Rast, who insists that anxiety is something no one gets to avoid in this life. Not even the Jacobs of the world. Anxiety is a symptom of being alive. What we do with it is what makes the difference.

If you've only heard anxiety referred to as a disorder that you need to get over, or if you've ever been overwhelmed by worry and anxious thoughts, it may sound like terrible news that anxiety comes with waking up in this world as a limited and imperfect human being. But maybe it's not, if we understand anxiety in a certain way.

The root of the word "anxious" means "tight," or "constricted." David Stendl-Rast actually believes our basic human anxiety goes all the way back to the experience of birth. You don't have to buy that idea to accept that if I'm less than all powerful and there's something at stake in my life, anxiety will be present. I may not be able to do what is required. All the presence of anxiety really means is that there is some element of risk present in my life, which, of course, is always the case.

Brother David quotes Suzuki Roshi who compares anxiety to the wind in your face when you ride a bicycle. It's actually evidence that you're moving. That you're alive. And he also says that if your courage is just a nose ahead of your anxiety, you can overcome it and even transform it. You don't need infinite or perfect courage. You don't need to be fearless. You just need enough courage to keep natural anxiety from

turning into fear. Because fear really can be destructive when it's the primary force that drives us.

This interplay between anxiety, courage, and fear, as David Stendl-Rast uses these terms, made even more sense to me when I turned things around and considered my life with other people. We often think courage is something we have to marshal within ourselves all by ourselves. But the word "courage" is hidden in plain view within the word "encourage," isn't it? To encourage is to instill a little courage in someone else. So a question worth asking is whether I influence the lives around me by instilling courage in them or by instilling fear.

Using fear to control or influence people is as old as the Bible and as current as the Sunday paper. It works, if power and influence are all that we're after. But if I'm honest, when I stoop to using fear to gain some advantage over somebody else, I'm probably acting out of some unresolved fear of my own. We all probably know what it feels like to fear someone else, and, unfortunately, we probably also know what it's like to feel a little more powerful because we've made somebody else a little more afraid.

But I bet we've also all known people who make us feel a little more at home in our own skin when we're around them. People who make us feel seen and affirmed for who we truly are, not for the person they need us to be or the one we wish we were. These encounters and friendships are encouragements in the deepest sense of the word. They give us courage.

Since theirs is a truthful kind of seeing, it doesn't deny our imperfections and limitations. But the encouraging person doesn't use them to put us in our place. Rather they put our ordinary human anxiety in its place, providing us with just enough courage to make us empathetic, curious, and kind, rather than frightened, defensive, or even cruel. It could even be that when we've received just enough courage — or encouragement — to hold it, our anxiety itself can be transformed into a source of connection and even an energy to make the world a less fear driven place.

Look back at Jacob's story again. From the moment of his birth, Jacob doesn't instill courage in others. His method is to instill fear and uncertainty about what this trickster might be up to next. You've got to keep your guard up around this one if you don't want to be his next mark, even if you're his brother or his dad. But here he is alone in the wilderness, sleeping with his head on a stone, but almost certainly with one eye open, lest the brother he's cheated come charging over the next hill with vengeance in his eyes. This is what winning looks like when fear directs and consumes our lives, isn't it?

But in the midst of Jacob's self destructive victory, Esau does not arrive. God does. And God doesn't come to strike fear into his heart. God will, in fact, go ahead and bless the world through the offspring of this Jacob, whose name a little later in the story, after another restless night, will become Israel. God blesses Jacob, not because of who Jacob is, but because of who God is. God blesses Jacob because God is love, not fear.

And love — perfect, unconditional, redeeming love — is the most powerful form of encouragement of them all.

We're told that the morning after Jacob's dream, he took the very stone he'd used for a pillow, and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on top of it to mark the uncomfortable place where he received the one gift he couldn't go out and take for himself. The spot where he received a measure of grace and blessing he knew he didn't deserve. Quite possibly it marked the moment in his life when fear loosened its grip just a bit, and the seed of a more courageous way to live took root.

Stay tuned. The old Jacob will never go away entirely. But take note of the relationships our Manipulator-In-Chief will make in the chapters and the years to come. Restoration and new life really will happen when he lives out of his blessedness and belovedness, rather than by spreading fear in the people around him that they'll be the victim of his next scheme. Stay tuned. For this is a story that, for all its strangeness and absurd moments of grace, may still be a source of the encouragement you and I need to pedal on into the wind of our own anxieties today. And today, when fear seems to be jet fuel for the world's most powerful engines, it may not be too small a thing for the Christian community to be that place where people add courage to each other's lives through love, which, we're told in so many ways in these sacred stories, is the surest way of all to drive out fear.