

Rock Pillows and Sacred Stones  
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Genesis 28:10-19

I have always liked rocks.

Okay, not enough to actually study them and learn about them!

But I have always been drawn to them.

I can't seem to walk a beach or along a river without picking up rocks  
of different shapes and colors.

I used to have a large glass jar full of rocks I had gathered on my travels.

I even polyurethaned them all so they'd stay shiny when dry!

I put them in a box and moved them to Maine,

where they sat in my garage doing nothing for 8.5 years.

So when we moved here, I didn't bring them with me.

I figured that I could no longer remember where I got them,

and I wasn't displaying them anymore,

and we really needed to downsize because of the cost of moving.

So what was the point in keeping them?

I miss my rocks.

I miss knowing that I have these mementos of my travels.

No, I don't remember where each rock came from.

But I remember that they came from Long Island, New York,

and Zion National Park in Utah,

and beaches in Florida and California and Connecticut and Maine

and parks in Georgia and Washington State

and Mexico and Canada.

I don't remember the stories of where I found each rock,

any more than I know the stories of how those rocks came to be.

But still they meant something to me.

They were more than souvenirs.

They were connections to places and times and people.

There was one rock not in that collection—

one rock that didn't get polyurethaned and put in a glass jar

and then boxed up and not moved.

I found this quartz near my family's cabin in Canada more than fifty years ago.

According to Julie Maxson, it looks like it was part of a quartz vein  
that would have formed in fractures in ancient granite.  
According to Julie, the rocks of western Ontario are among the oldest on earth,  
3-3.5 Billion years old.

I knew none of this until I asked her on Friday,  
and yet I have carried it with me, move after move,  
through 12 cities in 9 states,  
and for more than fifty years.

I'm not even sure why.

Maybe I keep it as a testament to my young self  
who thought every piece of quartz was a treasure.

Maybe because it reminds me of a special place,  
my family's cabin in Canada,  
a place of great joy and laughter.

I keep it in spite of the fact that its edges are rough,  
when all my other favorite rocks are smooth.

I keep it in spite of the fact that my special place in Canada  
held not just joy and laughter but also pain, trauma, and exclusion.

Somehow this rock has become more than quartz.

It has become a monument to my ever-changing life  
by being one thing that doesn't change.

Such is our connection to the earth.

At first glance, the rock is not the most important part of today's Bible reading.  
The story is about Jacob, but what our portion of the story didn't tell you  
is that he was fleeing for his life at the time.

Jacob and his brother Esau were, of course, twins born to Isaac and Rebekah.  
Esau was born first, and in their society that was an important distinction.

There were many things that the firstborn son received the others did not.  
When your "older brother" beats you into the world by mere minutes,  
it would naturally be hard to take.

With his mother's help, Jacob swindled his brother Esau out of the birthright  
belonging to the firstborn son.

In the next major story in the Jacob saga, Jacob tricked his father into giving him  
the blessing that was reserved for the oldest son.

Naturally, Esau was furious when he found out,

and their mother Rebekah decided it was time for Jacob to go find a wife—  
a wife from their home country far away.  
It was their excuse for Jacob leaving town, but really he was fleeing for his life.

This is where our text for today picks up,  
with Jacob forced to run away from home  
by the consequences of his greed and duplicity.  
And so “Jacob is on the lam between a place where he is no longer welcome  
and a place where he has never been.”<sup>1</sup>  
It must have been a troubled sleep that Jacob fell into.  
Even if his conscience wasn’t gnawing at him,  
that stone pillow must’ve been a pain in the neck.  
Jacob goes to sleep, certainly not expecting to encounter God during the night,  
not even in a dream.  
If he’d known, he might have tried to stay awake.  
I would, if I were in his shoes.  
If I’d done what he did,  
I’d be drinking double espresso to keep from meeting God in my dreams.  
I’m betting that Jacob doesn’t want to hear from God right now.  
He doesn’t want to hear a word of judgment, a pronouncement of guilt.

And he doesn’t get one.  
And frankly, that’s rather annoying.  
Instead he gets a dream of a ladder or a staircase reaching up to heaven,  
with angels ascending and descending upon it.  
(And depending on your age, you are now humming “We are climbing  
Jacob’s ladder” or Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to heaven!”)  
And then Jacob receives a promise from God:  
“The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;  
and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth.”  
Now, after hearing about Jacob’s misdeeds,  
we might have been expecting a different response from God.  
I would like at least a “turn from your wicked ways and then”  
kind of message.  
But instead Jacob gets a renewal of the promise Abraham received—  
the promise of land and descendants and blessings.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Barry J. “Keeping the Faith in Babylon.” {HYPERLINK "about:blank"}.

It seems to me like God is rewarding bad behavior.

I don't know Jacob's heart.

Maybe fleeing for his life changed him.

As he laid down to sleep, alone, covered only by a stolen blessing,  
the threats of his brother ringing in his ears,  
maybe he realized, for the first time,  
that he was reaping what he sowed.

Then again, maybe he didn't.

The Bible is like life in this way.

I don't get to decide who gets grace . . .

which is frustrating when I look at others,  
but comforting when I look at myself.

Still, that's not really the part of the story that interests me.

What interests me is Jacob's response.

Jacob wakes up and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

And so he takes that rock he used as a pillow,

and he stands it upright,

and he anoints it with oil,

and he names the place Bethel, the house of God.

He leaves it as a marker to the place where he encountered the Divine.

Last week Dorothea led a trip to the Wahpekute Dakota site, Inyan Bosdata,  
what is commonly called Castle Rock.

There we learned about the Wahpekute people

and how they most likely used this sacred site.

The rock formation used to be much larger.

The top more narrow pillar fell off over 100 years ago.

Winds and rain and hail have beat down the sandstone.

Unlike the rock at Bethel, it was not placed there by human hands,

but by the forces of the earth.

But still it stands as a sacred space, a sacred site,

a testament to where the people encountered the Divine.

There is a sacred place in my wife Jackie's life—

a cave near her home in New York called the Stone Church.

The opening has the same arch as our architecture.  
The river enters at an opening at the top,  
    creating a waterfall or two,  
    then moves through the cave and continues on its way.  
There is a rock about thirty feet back into the cave that,  
    when the light shines on it at a certain time of day,  
    it looks like an angel.  
It is one of her thin places, a sacred place of water and rock.

It was not always so.  
In the 1600s, 100 miles away from the Stone Church,  
    in the village of Mystic, Connecticut, there was a tribe of Pequot.  
In the Pequot war of 1636-38, the English colonists  
    and their Narragansett and Mohegan allies teamed up against the Pequot.  
While the warriors were away, they surrounded and burned to the ground  
    the village of Mystic.

    Orders were given to shoot anyone who tried to escape the flames.  
    Seven hundred women, children, and older people were inside.  
After learning what had happened to his village,  
    Sassacus, the head of the tribe, fought the English at Fairfield Swamp.  
    The survivors fled to what is now called the Stone Church,  
    where they hid to recuperate  
    until they could make their way further north.  
I don't know how long they hid there, or how they viewed the space,  
    whether it was sacred or not.  
    But when you stand in that space,  
    I swear you can hear their voices in the running water  
    and feel their spirits in the rocks.

We are connected to the earth and to its people.

It has been a difficult week in our country.  
This week the Supreme Court of the United States declared that  
    suspects have no recourse if they are not read their rights  
    when they are arrested.  
The Supreme Court also declared that states don't have the right  
    to prohibit concealed carry weapons.  
They declared that tax money can pay for private religious education—

education that would declare some members of our community  
“abominations.”

And they declared that Roe v. Wade was wrongly decided,  
and that women do not have bodily autonomy  
or the power to decide whether to give birth.

I am told that we are not all in agreement on this last topic,  
even in a church as progressive as ours.

We struggle in different ways with abortion.

But I think we can find common ground in the belief that the government  
should not make such intimate choices for individuals and families,  
that people with uteruses should have more rights to their own bodies  
than corpses have,

and that there should always be options in case of violence,  
a threat to the mother’s health,  
or a fetal condition that is inconsistent with life.

Those rights were taken away this week,  
and countless thousands will pay the price.

Pregnant people will die.

Children will be born into families where they are not wanted.

Life will be made more difficult for people already on the margins,  
with another mouth to feed,

another life to protect in an abusive household.

Victims of rape will be forced to carry to term and give birth  
to a constant reminder of their assault.

Pregnant people whose fetus has died in utero will be forced  
to carry it to term.

Miscarriages will be investigated as if they were criminal acts.

A woman in Texas who has been working to help people in need of abortions  
obtain them out of state says that many of their clients  
do not have proper identification for travel  
because they have never flown anywhere.

Can you imagine the fear in a young girl’s heart?

Can you imagine the despair in a parent

who is barely keeping food on the table as it is,

who is at the end of their rope and patience

who went through post partem depression so severe

that they know another pregnancy will threaten their life?

And the architects behind this change are not finished.

They are aiming for gay marriage.

They are targeting contraception.

All it will take is one town clerk to refuse to give a marriage license,  
or one pharmacist to refuse to refill a prescription,  
and we will be off to the races for another opportunity  
for the Supreme Court to take away human rights.

Men, you need to know that the women of child-bearing age in your life  
are terrified.

Straight people, you need to know that the queer people in your life  
are terrified.

All around us, rights are being threatened and we need to speak up, speak out,  
and vote out those who would do the taking.

Otherwise we will have only mementos of when we were free.

Now, what does all this have to do with Jacob?

The dream of the ladder or stairway between earth and heaven  
isn't what made the place holy.

It's what alerted Jacob to the fact that it was holy.

His response was: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn't know it!"

Sometimes it is hard to recognize that God is in this place,  
especially when we find ourselves in difficult times,  
whether of our own making,  
by the decisions of others,  
or just bad luck.

It can be hard to recognize that God is in this place,  
when we don't see the ladder or the staircase,  
when we don't see the angels,  
when we don't hear God's voice.

But God is there, nonetheless.

This place is the house of God . . .

this illness, this life-change, this ending, this beginning

this loneliness, this fear, this longing

this place—God is in *this* place—even if we don't know it.

Jacob's mistake was announcing that one place was Bethel, the house of God.  
We know that any ground can be the house of God.

Any rock can be sacred.

Any part of earth—all the earth—is the house of God.  
And all the people of the earth are children of God.

And that is why we stand up.  
That is why we say "no!" to cruelty.  
That is why we demand equality and equal protection under the law.  
That is why we work for justice.

Because we are connected to the earth and all its people.  
Because we have met God here.  
Because we are standing on holy ground.

The holy ground of community and support.

The holy ground of comfort and assurance

The holy ground of anger and protest.

The holy ground of resistance.

And if we do not resist, even the rocks will cry out.