

*The Art of Making Holy-Days*  
Genesis 28:10-16

Thanksgiving week. For many of us this holiday will be full of family, gathering in a way you couldn't do last year. I want to linger a little bit over this story from an ancient text, about another family in the story of our ancestors.

In that scene we just read from the Book of Genesis, Jacob had just had a falling out with his family. Jacob impersonated his older brother Esau. Convinced his father Isaac, aging and almost blind, to give to Jacob instead of Esau the most valuable thing their father owned. The trick worked just the way it was supposed to. Jacob got exactly what he had calculated receiving. But to get it, Jacob enacted an unforgivable betrayal against his family. There is no way to hear this story and think of Jacob as anything other than a terrible human being, selfish and deceitful, willing to harm even the people he was supposed to love if they got in the way of his personal gain.

And now Jacob has to leave home, get out of town before his brother's anger has time to fully shape itself into revenge. He wanders out in the desert alone, more sure of what he can't go back to than he is of where he's headed. I wonder what he felt as he walked. Fear? Remorse? Or was it vindication? When he laid down on the ground that first night, with a stone pillow under his head, I wonder if Jacob didn't tell himself the story over and over again, every time making Esau more into the guy who'd deserved everything Jacob had done to him. We are endlessly capable of self-deception. I know this. I imagine Jacob was no different.

Finally Jacob falls asleep. And he has a strange dream. There's a staircase, like a ladder, going from earth at the bottom, reaching all the way into heaven. Beings, like angels, messengers of some sort, passed each other on that ladder, some going up, some going down. And then comes a voice. Jacob knows this voice is God. 'I have blessed you,' it says. 'Not only you, but your descendants, your children not yet conceived. I am with you now. I will protect you everywhere you go. I will bring you back to this land, your family. I will not leave you alone.'

Really?

I wonder if Jacob's conscience pricked him when he heard that blessing from God. Was this, like his father's blessing, meant for someone else? Had he stolen this one too? Maybe Jacob was shameless to the bone, but if he had even a little bit of humanity in him, he must have known he was being offered a gift he hadn't earned. I wonder if something softened in Jacob when he woke up and remembered the dream. There is nothing that brings the sting of tears to my eyes faster than someone offering me a kindness I did not deserve.

It was a rocky, isolated place. Jacob was not too far from his family's home that had held mostly resentment and rivalry and unhappiness. And here, Jacob hears this surprising promise, a generosity he had not calculated. He is a little overwhelmed. He marks the spot on the dirt where

it happened, right there, under the rock he had laid his head on. And he speaks one of the most beautiful lines in Scripture: ‘How filled with awe is this place, and I did not know it.’

I’d like to tell you that Jacob was a changed man after that, that the night vision of angels carrying down from heaven big undeserved blessings made him humble and generous every day from then on. That’s not what happens. Jacob continues on his journey, headed always away from his parents’ home. He finds a new place, and a girl he loves; he makes a new home with a new family. He grows his stack of possessions. He gets ahead, by pretty much the same set of tricks and self-promotion he’d used on Esau and his father Isaac.

Wherever you go, there you are.

The story of Jacob and his family occupies almost the whole book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Curious, isn’t it, that the story of our religious tradition begins with a dysfunctional family that stumbles in and out of a promise that God makes again and again—to make them a blessing to the whole earth. There are moments when they’re inspired to be better; and then they fall into familiar patterns of conflict. They hurt each other and it takes them years to find forgiveness. They belong to one another fiercely, and sometimes they don’t understand each other at all.

Does this sound like any other family you know?

It is Thanksgiving week. The origins of this tradition make it a uniquely American holiday, but its customs—food and family—make it universal. This holiday calls us to gratitude: stopping to give thanks for all the things that come with our belonging, things we usually take as the given’s in our lives.

But those given’s that are your family’s own peculiar mix bring anxiety as well as joy. They’re familiar. In our families it’s not the unknowns that make us anxious; it’s the patterns we know too well. As you take your seats around the table, you know exactly where the trouble is likely to pop up. Almost certainly someone will bring up vaccinations, or politics. There will be a not-careful-enough comment about someone’s pandemic weight gain...or loss. And then, it’s entirely possible that your sister-in-law will start in again on the shameful contrast between her Bible-believing church and your liberal church. Almost surely you will be watching, worriedly, for how much *someone* is drinking.

You know when cranberries cook, how the individual cranberries rise to the surface and make a little pop before they settle into sauce? That’s how families work too, I think. Sharp-tasting words, little bubbles of resentment or disappointment, the memory of a moment when someone felt dismissed or overlooked, worry that always comes out sounding like judgment. All those things that happen with people we are bound to and love imperfectly. Just like cranberries, they rise to the surface and make a small explosion before they become part of the sweet-sour mix of your family’s Thanksgiving dinner.

My personal contribution to my family’s Thanksgiving anxiety is as familiar as dirt. Many years, maybe most, I get consumed with small things, things that don’t actually matter: the neatness of

my house, the details of that single meal, the refusal of certain members of my family to act the same way I would at all times. *Et cetera*. Please, God, don't let me get caught up in anything that precedes the word *et cetera*. Especially this year.

Because this year I know—we all know—how precious our togetherness is. That when we didn't see it coming, something as outside of us as a virus, something we couldn't control at all, kept us apart. So this year, I want to cook into this holiday only the things that matter. I want to love the people I love differently, better, than I have done before. I want to be patient with their familiar flaws, and my own. I'd like us to laugh together at the edge of those conversational ravines that we usually jump straight to the bottom of. I want this Thanksgiving to be more full of unclenched love and genuine gratitude than ever.

I want this Thanksgiving to feel *holy*.

You too? How do we find that kind of serenity this week, preferably before Wednesday night, or at least Thursday at noon?

I'm looking for one mantra, one rule, that I can keep at hand for the moments when my resolve to love weakens. I want it to poke me every time I'm tempted to wrap myself again in the armor of intense gravy-making. Maybe the rule is this: to remember that everyone, *everyone*, is looking for belonging. We *all* have a deep, constant craving for love from the people who matter to us.

Sometimes, when we are healthy and strong, we can move toward the people we love in graceful, authentic ways. But we are not always strong. And some people, even the ones we think ought to know better, only know how to ask for connection by banging on a door that you thought was already standing open. 'Let's catch up; I've missed you,' comes out sounding like 'You never call me.' A plea for attention is masked in words that sound a lot like bragging, or excessive busy-ness. An awkward attempt to connect comes wrapped in barbed language. Every one of these clumsy gestures says, 'Love me. I need you to love me.'

I think this might be true. And even if it's not, maybe it's better to live as though it is true.

In Jacob's dream he saw angels coming down from heaven, bringing him a message, a blessing, from God. But his vision also included angels going *up* the ladder. 'Why?' the rabbis asked. Why would angels be going both directions? What does it mean, this vision of messengers who are not only bringing messages from God but are climbing up into God's lap? This is what the midrash answers: Maybe angels don't live in heaven. Maybe they live on earth. Just like us, they shuttle back and forth between moments that seem like holiness and a lot of time with feet sunk deep into mud that doesn't feel like holy ground at all. When they're filled up, they love well, they speak kindly, they bring messages of blessing. When they're on their way back to heaven, they are depleted.

And they are still angels. The question is: Will we recognize them even when they are tired and needy and a little bit annoying?

Or maybe *we* are the angels, and the purpose of all our striving toward God is to return us back to our own flawed, imperfect families to love them better. And then the question is: Will we remember what message it is that God was hoping we'd carry back with us? No doubt the message you are meant to carry is a blessing someone did not earn, a kindness they did not deserve. Say it, speak it out loud, because this is how holy ground suddenly appears under our feet.

Or maybe it has been here all along.

'How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it.'