

The Holy Roller-Coaster

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stephen Phelps
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 19, 2026

Texts: *Genesis 28:10-22; Matthew 21:28-32*

German scholars coined the term *Heilsgeschichte*—literally, *holy history*—to sweep the whole course of the Bible’s history under one purpose. I coined this sermon’s title—holy roller-coaster—to help students of the Old Testament set the shape of that history firmly in mind. Sprawling across fifteen hundred years, the Old Testament tells of four peak experiences of covenantal loyalty and divine favor separated by four steep dives into disaster. On the first day of a college class, I used to chalk students’ memories of the old stories onto a blackboard, good and evil, early and late in time. A sine wave appears: Abraham, slavery in Egypt, Moses and the ten commandments, decay in the time of judges, more. I’d ask for comments on the big picture. “Looks like a roller-coaster,” says one. From a deeper place, someone admits, “Looks like my life.” Nervous laughter ripples across the young faces like an autumn wind cutting up a summer lake.

My life. “It has its ups and downs,” we say, all but dismissing how inexpressibly difficult, how exquisitely precious it is to live. My life. What is it? Common turns of phrase reveal confusion. Of an unpleasant undertaking, we say, *It’s an uphill climb*. When things fall apart, *It’s all going downhill fast*. Is there no rest? That’s the roller-coaster. In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, the expert devil gives his novice nephew instruction in how to ruin a life:

My dear Wormwood, humans cannot see the future, so will never understand the law of undulation. When life is good, they fear it won’t last, and thereby prove fat targets for our temptations. When life is evil, they fear the dark days will never end; in despair, they are so easily brought to ruin by us.

The law of undulation. The roller-coaster. Buddhist tradition names it *samsara*, the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Is it holy? No, it is not. Not when we push for the peaks, ignoring anyone crushed beneath our feet, ourselves included. Not when we flee pain and dull the mind to escape despair. Not when pretense masks our conflicts and our shame for the past.

The roller-coaster cannot be stopped but when you trust yourself to reality, whose great name is God, always and ever present, then you are no more anxious to get on top. To deny the past. To make America great again. Then any place on life’s roller-coaster can be the place of blessing. That is when it becomes a holy roller-coaster. You come free. Nearer, my God; nearer to Thee.

This is Jacob’s story. He is twenty. He has deceived his father on his death bed to cheat his brother of his birthright. Jacob now flees home in terror of the consequence of his actions. He is all alone on karma’s unholy roller-coaster. He comes to a certain place and stops for the night. A certain place is anywhere that progress fails, and you just must stop. The sun sets on the day; on your parenthood or your marriage; your work; your health; your hopes; your country. It isn’t that you must be twenty like Jacob to come to a certain place; only at least twenty to suffer the wilderness of a future from which the stars have fallen. When asked how things are

going, we can play the tape on a loop that chatters on about the children, the church, the job, the spouse, the house, the good war, the . . . Sometimes you think you believe it. But sometimes, the sun sets and you do not blast the darkness with lights or shatter the silence. In a certain place, you take a stone for a pillow.

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
darkness be over me, my rest a stone . . .

A stone for a pillow. That is, no more of the old war, fighting what you hate about your life, or what or who has come into your life. Self-hatred, race-hatred, moralism, accusation, punishment, guilt; using these weapons of the old war only kept everything the same. Conventional religion spends its energies resisting arrest and promising false escapes, so that its prayers and priests and preaching can keep the unholy roller-coaster running, filling what's empty with sensations and false fears, so that nothing ever change.

But if you are in a certain place, like Jacob, you do not think you know God. Coming to a certain place, assumptions about how God works, or how prayer works, drop away. You stop. You do not take a pill for a pillow, but a stone. You do not take politics for a pillow, or a drink, or the internet. Rather, take the hardest thing in your life. Set that beneath your head. Lie down in that place with that stone. This is faith at work. This is the wisdom which has through the ages kept the story of Jacob in the hearts of our mothers and fathers. Do not so quickly segregate what seems good from what bad, or what seems sacred from what profane. On the holy roller-coaster, there is no holy land more holy than another, for God is always and ever present to receive you in a certain place.

Jacob lies down in that place. And he dreams a ladder set upon the earth, with messengers of God—angels—ascending and descending. Heaven and earth touching, no separation.

There let the way appear, steps unto heaven;
All that thou sendest me—good and evil, sacred and profane—in mercy given; angels to beckon me
nearer, my God, to thee.

How do you come to this place? How, come nearer? In silence, is the truest answer. Not in beseeching, not in directing, not in knowing what is now to be done. Wendell Berry calls it “the way of ignorance.” A medieval contemplative called it “the cloud of unknowing.” In a little book called *The World of Silence*, Max Picard offers: “In silence is the Holy Wilderness, because the wilderness and the house of God are one.” (p. 19, *Beth-el* in Hebrew.)

Any who have sojourned in a forest wilderness or desert know a meaning for this. Those who say “my God is in nature,” however, have not yet heard the word from Jacob, because this stop, this silence, this way of opening to the divine dream that we are holding like a flame today, is not a personal devotion. Rather, think of the silence as having decisive moral consequence. By means of arrest in this inner place, reality—whose great name is God—can connect you to *this* world, to these fellow beings whose blue globe you share, to all the dead and gone, and to all who are yet to come. This is what your stop and silence is for. These are whom you are for. This is true religion. That word, *religion*, is cousin with *ligament*. True religion works as a ligament,

connective tissue between yourself and reality, between yourself and humanity, between yourself and creation. Stop.

Sabbath is for a stop in this wilderness, not because this day is more holy than the six, but because you and I need practices to learn our freedom from the roller-coaster. Prayer and meditation are for a stop. They are not levers such as clever rats press for cubes of bliss; they are silence in the wilderness, that one may learn what “I am” in the presence of reality. Generosity—giving from our self a serious portion—is also a way to learn freedom from the roller-coaster, trusting that God make us known to our self through our relinquishments, where worry, control, and getting are forgotten.

Double-down here. Let us apply Pres. Lincoln’s best-known speech to our own day, for *“We are now engaged in a great civil [strife], testing whether this nation . . . conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal, can long endure.”* Many powerful and dangerously wealthy people in our midst have made it their aim to make America white again by putting democracy to death. First and last, this is a spiritual crisis. It is spiritual because, for the guidance humans need to live together, only democratic practices express the spiritually given wisdom that all people are created equal. This has nothing to do with party; its political dimensions only divert attention from the spiritual crisis, which has to do with the tragedy that through all our generations, millions of Americans have needed to deny or forget that race-hatred and violence have run every round on the unholy roller-coaster of this nation’s story. To be sure, that is not all we have done, but fear and hatred have fueled our roller-coaster: unholy, faithless, striving to be on top. To pretend this is not happening, democracy must be killed. Here in the wilderness of 2026, take this stone for a pillow.

Will wisdom govern the nation once more? Who can answer? Any who have set this stone for a pillow at the ear and who, like Jacob, have acknowledged our past of lies and violence for ambition and money, only these can serve when things fall apart. Only you who can suffer without misery and move on a holy roller-coaster can see the vision of heaven and earth made one, here, undivided in time or space.

Then, with our waking thoughts bright with thy praise,
out of our stony griefs, Bethel we’ll raise;
so by our woes to be nearer, O God, to thee . . .

Then will come, as for Jacob, the promise of renewed relationship to people not here. “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, the god of your fathers and mothers.” This place, says the Lord—this no-place of loss and grief on which you lie, on which so many have been laid down—this place will I give to you and to yours . . . **and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.**” Can we hope this for all the nations, absent the greed and gore of national pride? Can we risk that a new story come, making meaning from the past, while revealing a future not like our past? Only those who stand in the Spirit this way can help move a future where *thy will be done on earth* as it is in heaven. Where heaven and earth touch.

Or if, on joyful wing cleaving the sky,
sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward we'll fly,
still all our song shall be, nearer, O God, to thee . . .

"What do you think?" asks Jesus. "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 'I will not,' he said. But later he changed his mind and went."

Our whole message today could fit in that word: "he changed his mind." To change our mind and come nearer, O God, to thee, we stop, we must stop, in a certain place. There, those who wait upon the Lord listen for God still speaking: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go . . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised." Lo, I am with you to the end of the age, always and ever present.

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