William Butler Yeats, early 20th century Irish poet, wrote late in his life about a loss of imagination, imagery, and inspiration. The poem, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” laments a diminished sense of wonder and muse and ends with these lines:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

Listen to that last line again:

I must lie down where all the ladders start  
in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

A rag and bone shop was a resale shop. In Ireland, when Yeats wrote, a rag and bone man would push a handcart around the city to gather up refuse in the hopes that some of it could be resold for any purpose, even as compost.

Yeats writes that he’s left with life’s debris. Ravaged and scavenged all he has is decaying, vulnerable, mortal stuff. He’s down to the frailty and failings of the human heart. Everything else is stripped away. There was nothing left but the place where all ladders start.

It’s a poignant and powerful picture.  
It’s a picture of where we find Jacob.  
Jacob swindled and suckered his brother.  
He conspired with his mother to trick his father.  
He’s a scoundrel on the run.  
His father has sent him away to take a bride.  
He’s transient, stripped of all pretense, power, place or piety, at night in the middle of nowhere, alone, vulnerable, between a rock and hard place, amid foul rags and bones, he lays down to sleep.

And God breaks in.  
God props up a ladder to heaven.  
God comes to Jacob in a dream….
For thirteen years we had a handsome golden retriever named Phil. He was broad shouldered, gentle hearted, lazy, and well loved. He slept on the floor by our bed. But, every once in a while, in the middle of the night, he would let out a long mournful howl ~ a wail that broke your heart, scared small children, and woke the neighbors. It was haunting and mysterious. I’d roll over, with my heart racing, to check what was wrong, only to find him sound asleep. He was dreaming.

I hope he dreamed of being a young puppy bounding across a grassy knoll after something stinky; I wonder what he dreamed about that gave rise to a mournful howl.

A doggie therapist might suggest that in his dreaming some unconscious reality was breaking through to consciousness. Some part of his psyche, some piece of his past, some puddle of disclosure was trying to come to the surface. Or, maybe his doggie brain was just randomly processing the memories and meals of that day.

Of course, we’ve learned not to put too much stock in dreams….

In the words of Walter Brueggemann,

> We children of the Enlightenment do not regularly linger over such illusive experiences as dreams. We seek to “enlighten” what is before us and to overcome the inscrutable and eerie in order to make the world more manageable. We do well in management while we are awake, and we keep the light and power on 24/7. Except, of course, that we must sleep. We require sessions of rest and thus of vulnerability. Dreams address us. They invite us beyond our management.

God addresses Jacob when he is not in control. Unbidden, unmanaged, God intrudes. He doesn’t track down Jacob as a seeker in a sanctuary, or one of the faithful at an altar; he doesn’t come at Jacob’s behest. Rather, God interrupts when Jacob is not looking. He finds Jacob in a mundane moment of human vulnerability. God comes to Jacob where Jacob is.

And, maybe that’s a good place to begin.

> One remarkable claim of the Old and New Testaments is not that God creates and gives commandments, but that God intervenes. God invades. God breaks into history, into human life, even into our lives.

> And that’s a staggering claim. For while it suggests that we’re not alone in “this thing called life” (Prince), it also leaves open all sorts of possibilities of how, and when, and to whom God might come.

We build temples, mosques, and churches to engage God.
We practice rituals, liturgies, and sacraments to encounter God.
We long after God in art and music and poetry.
We search for God….

> And yet God turns up where we least except him: in a dream, to a barren old couple, in a manger, on a cross, in the rag and bone shop of the heart.
Where has God intruded in your life?
Where has God dropped a ladder?
When you weren’t in control, when you least expected it, when you were asleep, where did God break in?

In this first dream in scripture, Jacob sees a ladder.
That “ladder” was probably more like a ramp. Mesopotamian ziggurats were huge layered land mass temples, often times with steps leading to the next level. They were believed to connect heaven and earth and be the dwelling place of the gods. Chances are the tower of Babel was one of these ziggurats; and chances are that Jacob’s dream was of something similar.

Jacob sees angels scurrying up and down this “stairway to heaven” (Led Zeppelin), and God is either at the top of the ladder, or somehow beside Jacob. (When Jacob wakes he says that God was “in” this place.) Either way the dream suggests that the membrane between heaven and earth is permeable.

There is an intertwined, overlapping, unified creation.
There is no secular reality and a separate sacred reality.
Jacob is not pulled up into some otherworldly spirituality.
God doesn’t sweep him up out of his mess.
God comes to Jacob in a particular place in time and space; and affirms the promises that he made to his father, grandfather, and grandmother.
God breaks in and says:

*I’m with you and I will not leave you.
I will watch over you wherever you go.
I will give you and your descendants this land.
And all people will be blessed through you...*

Now. I know that this reaffirmation of God’s covenant is the big deal in this text. I know that this is one more chapter in the unfolding drama of salvation history. God is making promises that run from Jacob through Jesus to beautiful little Ari Rose. Thanks be to God.

But…. But, I’m still stuck with the humanity of Jacob and the ambush of God. Does God show up in self-authenticating ways when we’re in dire straits, in desperate need, down to our last card? Is the dream of Jacob a window into the nature of God?

I know many of us can offer testimony that some existential-reality-of-God showed up in a therapist’s office, at an AA meeting, on the side of a bed in the oncology unit, on the mourner’s bench, etc. I also know many of us are longing for the same…. 

And yet, the truth of the matter is:
I don’t know one of us who isn’t broken.
I don’t know one of us who doesn’t have issues.
I don’t know one of us, who if you strip away our accomplishments and our middle-
American safeties and sensibilities, isn’t left with foul rags and bones.

    Religious practice can be a cover.
    Class and culture and the illusion of control will carry you only so far.
    But at some point, life will lay us bare.
    At some point, I’ll be uncovered as an imposter.

But as the gospel is true then it is precisely when we’re laid bare that God breaks in. When we’re empty handed, when we’re lost, when we’re scared, when we’re dead, that’s where God finds us. That’s where all ladders start.

John Buchanan puts it this way:

    That is the basic thrust of biblical faith: “I am with you… in the world. The world is my focus.” God comes to us in our humanness: where we are most human, which means in our frailties and weaknesses, in our doubts, in anxieties and fears, in our hopes and dreams. God comes to us in our disappointments, our failure to be good and strong and honest as we want to be. God comes to us in our guilt, our betrayals and deceits, as God came to Jacob.

I’m sure there are other ways that God breaks in, but if God would come to a “dyed-in-the-wool, double-barreled con artist” (Frederick Buechner) like Jacob, then surely God would come to me, or you, or to some other. For who are we to limit how far and wide God’s mercy extends?

Dear friends, the good news is that God dropped a ladder to Jacob. The good news is that God took up residence in these rags and bones in Jesus, whose last words in the Gospel of Matthew are:

    I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.