

July 23, 2017

Genesis 28:10-22 Romans 8:12-25

“Jacob’s Ladder”

At the end of this sermon, we will sing the song, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." I've always liked it, particularly since I have learned a bit about Jacob's dream, given to him by God, there at Bethel. The song is an African American spiritual, loved by many Christians. The song seems to suggest that WE have to do the climbing; the Bible story shows the angels coming DOWN the ladder to Jacob in his dream, to let him know the presence and care of God. But as we look at Jacob’s life story, it just may be that he did do some climbing, at least in his growth with God.

A reading of Genesis 25 reveals that the family of Isaac and Rebekkah was what social workers today would call "dysfunctional." The mother favored Jacob, the father favored Esau. In addition, Jacob wanted to trick Esau out of his older-brother rights and went to terrible lengths to do so, fooling their blind father into thinking that Jacob was Esau and therefore even stealing Esau's blessing! Doting mother Rebekkah was behind all the deceit!

The end of chapter 27 of Genesis tells us that Esau was so angry at Jacob that he planned to kill him once their father had died. So sneaky Rebekkah - knowing about Esau's intentions - began telling old daddy Isaac that she just couldn't stand the thought of Jacob marrying a local Canaanite girl the way Esau had done. She thought Jacob should go to his Uncle Laban's and find a more proper wife. Old Isaac agreed, to quiet his wife's complaints and also, perhaps, to rid himself of the son who had lied to him to steal his blessing. So Isaac sent Jacob out, first conferring upon him the blessing of Abraham.

Jacob went away in fear, because his brother Esau wanted to kill him, but also because in his day it was a frightening thing to leave one's family and head off for other territory. Even crooked Jacob was afraid.

In the course of his travels, Jacob became tired, so he found a stone and lay his head down to sleep. One might have imagined that Jacob would have had nightmares, or spent a sleepless night tossing and turning. Not so. According to the Bible, he slept like a baby, and had the sweet dream of the promise of God's blessing and continual presence. "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land..." (pause)

Imagine: God could have reacted differently to the young cheater, sleeping so peacefully on his rocky pillow. If I'd been writing the story, I believe I would have had God at least rebuke Jacob for his underhanded ways, and then demand from him true repentance. But God didn't. Instead, God gave this man of questionable moral character the most comprehensive announcement of the promise of God ever offered up to that time: Land, blessing for both Jacob and his heirs, and the presence of God with him until all is accomplished.

So Jacob discovered that God was with him: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it..." and he named the place Bethel, which means House of God. By conferring such a name on the place, Jacob acknowledged his personal relationship with God. God, at the same time, marked

Jacob as an agent for God's activities.

But that's not the end of the story! Characteristically, Jacob tried to make a bargain, offering his own terms to God! Talk about chutzpah! Jacob may have found God, but Jacob was still the same old Jacob! After God had made wonderful promises to him, Jacob outlined his requirements to God: "Okay, God: *if* you will be with me, and keep me in this way that I go, and *if* you will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and make it so that I come again to my father's house in peace, *then* you shall be my God...and I will even give a tenth of what I have to you."

**IF.** So Jacob said YES to God the only way he apparently could, and God put up with it. God honored Jacob. God worked through Jacob even though Jacob was a scoundrel, and God used who Jacob was to bring forth a nation, Israel... God was with Jacob every step of the way.

That's part of the meaning of Jacob's Ladder, I believe: No matter how arrogant or scoundrelly or fearful we may be, God is with us every step of the way. Jacob's trickery was in some ways awful, but God made good use of it; Jacob's perseverance brought forth the nation Israel.

But more than the particular experience through which Jacob learned of God's presence with him at Beth El and God's continuation of the promise given to Abraham through him, Jacob began climbing the ladder of one who grows through knowing God's presence in his life.

In the video series, *Wrestling with Angels*, Rabbi Harold Kushner spoke of Jacob's growth. In the lesson we read today, Jacob met God's tremendous promises with his own shrewd dealing and conditions. But later, when Jacob was twenty years older and once again in a tight spot, about to meet his brother Esau and very much afraid that his brother still meant to kill him, Jacob's relationship with God was very different. In Chapter 32 Jacob prays for God to deliver him from the hand of his brother Esau, confessing his fear, but he also confesses himself as unworthy of God's love and care. His prayer was grounded in the hope that God would still remain faithful to the promise God had made to him, and thus protect him and his descendants.

The ladder image fits. Today's lesson, with Jacob's arrogant negotiating with God, is the bottom rung of Jacob's ladder. But he moved higher and higher, learning more and more about God's ways and purposes for his life. *He came to know God as one who could be trusted, which was a big deal for one who could not be trusted.*

Jacob's Ladder - This makes it even more hopeful for us. Remember who Jacob was. He was a frightened wanderer, but he was also one who had done some really bad things. In lying to his father, he had failed to honor him. He was a cheater, a thief, one who was not to be trusted. He did not deserve a vision of God. But he did need it. In the vision of the angels traveling up and down between heaven and earth, Jacob was assured that in spite of everything he had done, communication between heaven and earth was not broken.

**Not long ago I read a suggestion for a children's sermon. The "prop" was a transistor radio. As the children gathered around, the sermon-giver was to suggest to them that there are lots**

**of sounds the children cannot hear, right there in the church. After a moment of silence, he or she would continue: "It may be hard to believe that we are surrounded right at this moment by many voices and much music." Then the radio would be held up, as the sermon-giver said: "In order for your ears to hear them, you have to have a receiver..." And then the radio would be turned on to reveal some of the sound waves in the air... (In fact, I believe that Mark may have done this one not too long ago)**

The example is a good one. We have to somehow receive the truth that Jacob discovered that day in that strange place: "Surely the Lord is in this place!" In a far-away land, in a hospital room, on the job, in a relationship, wherever we need vision or courage or direction; when places seem too familiar to have great meaning or we find ourselves wandering in patterns and situations that seem to suffocate the very life of our lives... Somehow God's Word to and for us needs to get through our deafness or despair... In many ways, Jesus Christ serves as our receiver, helping us to hear and see what God's way and care look like in flesh-and-blood life. Even our lives.

There is an old story of two simple folk who lived in a fisherman's cottage in a little village by the sea. When the man came home at the end of a day, his wife said to him, "The new minister came here today, and he asked a question I couldn't answer." "What did he ask?" "He asked me if Jesus Christ lives here." "And what did you say?" the husband demanded. "I didn't know what to say." "Well, didn't you tell him we are respectable people?" "But he didn't ask me that." "Well, why didn't you tell him that we go to church when we feel like it?" "But he didn't ask me that either." "Then you should have told him that sometimes we read the Bible." "But he didn't ask me that. What he asked me was, 'Does Jesus Christ live here?'"

"Surely the Lord is in this place"...

We may not deserve God's presence any more than Jacob did, but each one of us needs it just as desperately. In our own ways, each of us climbs "Jacob's Ladder," learning more and more that God is here, wherever "here" happens to be, and that God can be trusted, even when we can't.

May we receive what we need to be lifted higher and higher in our walk with God, so that our very lives - our words and actions - will proclaim to others, "Surely the Lord is in this place!" Amen.