

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Genesis 28:10-19 (NRSV)

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. [11] He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. [12] And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. [13] And the Lord stood beside him and said, "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 offspring; [14] and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. [15] Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." [16] Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!" [17] And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

[18] So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. [19] He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

HEAVEN'S GATE

The phrase "gate of heaven" in verse 17 reminded me of something that happened back in 1997. There was a cult called "Heaven's Gate" that made the news. Thirty-nine people committed suicide in order to shed their earthly "containers" and follow a comet to immortality.

In an attempt to find "heaven's gate" they were willing to give up everything, even their own life. Several members made a video before they died. One young lady looked into the camera and said,

"Maybe they are crazy for all I know. But, I don't have any choice but to go for it. I have been on this planet for thirty-one years, and there is nothing here for me."

She was awfully young to be experiencing such despair. It seemed like such a waste. She probably would have had many more years ahead of her.

But, she gave it all up for the chance that she might find "heaven's gate."

I think that many people are searching for heaven's gate. They might define heaven in a different way. But, many are struggling to find God and meaning in their lives, and some are willing to give up almost anything in that quest for meaning.

We now know the names of the suicide bombers who committed that act of terrorism in England. They weren't poor desperate people. They were bright young men who were liked by their neighbors. Just a week before

the bombings one neighbor saw several of them playing a game of cricket together. The ringleader of the bombers had a wife and children.

But, they chose to blow themselves up and take many innocent civilians with them. Why did they do this?

We don't know for sure, but we suspect that they were part of yet another radical Islamic group who believed that dieing in battle against one's enemies would assure them of a heavenly reward. They were willing to give up everything in order see heaven's gate.

A friend of one bomber said,
"He was a Muslim and he had to fight for Islam. This is called jihad. They're crying over 50 people while 100 people are dying every day in Iraq and Palestine. If they are indeed the ones who did it, it's because they believed it was right. They're in Heaven."

Most of us (thankfully) do not commit suicide in an attempt to find heaven. But, all of us, in one way or another are seeking heaven's gate. We are seeking fulfillment. We are trying to find security and satisfaction. We are trying to find comfort in an increasingly uncomfortable world. We want the promise of God's love and God's protection.

JACOB'S STRUGGLE

That's what Jacob wanted.
Jacob wanted the blessing of God.
And Jacob wanted earthly blessings as well.

But, unfortunately Jacob was born just a few seconds too late. His brother Esau made into the world first.

And Jacob, his fraternal twin arrived second while clinging to his brother's heel. In fact, that's how Jacob got his name. Jacob in Hebrew means "heel catcher" or "he who supplants." From the time of their birth there was a struggle between Jacob and Esau. And it was a sibling rivalry that would last for many, many years.

You need to know that in the ancient world the first-born male got everything, the flocks and herds, God's blessing ... everything. It was the first-born's birthright.

But, Jacob, the heel grabber was not about to accept such an arrangement. Through trickery Jacob was able to obtain God's blessing and the family fortune. Most of you remember how it happened, how Jacob dressed up like his brother, and with the aid of his mother tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau.

Once the blessing was given it could not be taken back. Only one blessing per family was the rule. Jacob would get it all. And his brother, Esau was left with nothing but bitterness and the Canaanite women that dear old mom despised so much.

LEAVING HOME

Esau with his red hair and fiery temper was not about to let this happen. He vowed to kill his brother Jacob once his doddering old father, Isaac died. Rebekah heard about the vow that Esau made. "Big Red" Esau was never very subtle in what he did or said, even when he was talking to himself!

Since Rebekah didn't want to lose even one of her children to senseless violence, plans were hastily made for Jacob to run away from home.

Oh, they said the reason for the trip was to find a suitable bride at his uncle's home in Haran. But, everyone knew the real reason that he left. Jacob had to leave or his ill tempered brother would kill him.

So Jacob left. Jacob had to flee the home that he so desperately wanted to inherit. He traveled all alone in a very inhospitable land.

I imagine that Jacob traveled quite quickly those first few days. Brother Esau was a great hunter and would have had no trouble hunting Jacob down if he found out soon enough that Jacob had escaped his wrath.

THE DREAM

After many miles of running, Jacob was totally exhausted. He decided to stop in some seemingly God-forsaken place because the sun was setting, and it was getting too dark to see where he was going.

With nothing but a rock for a pillow Jacob fell fast asleep.

That's what Jacob needed. Jacob, the great striver needed to fall asleep so that he could receive what he would not receive while he was awake. Jacob needed to quit running and start listening.

Jacob didn't know it yet, but there was more to life than just getting flocks and herds. What he needed was a sacred dream, a dream that would wake him up to the true nature of life.

And that's what happened. Jacob had such a life changing dream. It was a dream about heaven's gate. He dreamed that there was a stairway that went all the way to heaven, and on that stairway Jacob could see the angels of God ascending and descending.

And as he watched this marvelous sign, Jacob heard a word of promise from the Lord. The Lord from above "stood beside him" and said,

"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 offspring; [14] and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. [15] Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Genesis 28:13-15 (NRSV)

NOT JACOB'S LADDER

We often talk about climbing the ladder of success. Certainly that was Jacob's goal. But, this dream revealed to him that he was climbing the wrong ladder. The ladder that led to heaven's gate was found in a sacred place in the wilderness.

Do you remember that song we used to sing in Bible school? "We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder." The song made it seem like it was up to us to climb up to the presence of God. "Every rung goes higher, higher. Every rung goes higher, higher. Children of the Lord."

That's a fun song for the children. But, that's not the story that the Bible tells.

Jacob didn't climb up a ladder to meet the Lord.
The Lord came down to meet Jacob.

All Jacob's striving to climb over his brother, all his struggling to be number one ended in futility. Ladder climbing did not help Jacob one little bit.

Jacob's attempts to climb the ladder of success landed him in the wilderness.
Jacob's attempts to climb the ladder of success alienated him from family and friends.

He found himself isolated and all alone; at least he thought that he was all alone.

But, appearances are deceiving. What Jacob couldn't do, God was doing for him. All around him angels of the Lord were ascending and descending. God stood over and above it all, and God stood right beside him.

Jacob was blessed, not because he was able to trick his brother out of his birthright or because he was such a clever businessman. Jacob was blessed because God had chosen to bless him.

GOD REACHES DOWN TO EARTH

God reached down from heaven to touch Jacob, and through the story of Jacob God was going to touch all the peoples of the earth.

You see, this story is about more than just the life of one trickster by the name of Jacob. This story is about God and how God chooses to work in the world.

We may give up on God, but God never gives up on us.
We may be unfaithful, but God is always faithful.

We may run away from our problems, but no matter where we go, even when we think that we are all alone, God is standing over us. God is sending

his angels to minister to us in our time of need. God is standing beside us.

The place where we live this day might seem awfully forbidding. We might be dog tired, and our pillow might seem like a rock.

We might be in a place where all our dreams have gone south. We might be in a place where it seems like the future holds no hope. We might even be in a place that seems god-forsaken.

But, the story of Jacob reminds us that no place is god-forsaken. In the most unlikely place, God has decided to grant a dream of divinity and hope.

In this case the place was just outside of a nondescript town named Luz.

The town would be renamed Beth-El or house of God.

In the future there would be other dreams of divinity. God and his angels would appear to shepherds watching their flock in the field at night. The glory of the Lord would shine around them.

The little town of Bethlehem would be the unlikely location for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Divinity would not be found in the halls of power. Divinity would be found in the humble birth of a little baby boy named Jesus.

No one ever expects it. But, quite often it happens. An out of the way place is the place where God appears. Over and over again the Bible tells the same story. On the darkest night in the most unlikely of places, the Spirit of the living God brings a message of hope and salvation.

It is never a matter of grabbing the blessing for ourselves. It is a matter of God grabbing us.

UNDERSTANDING THE DREAM

Jacob had a dream that would be with him for the rest of his life, but it would be a long time before Jacob could fully understand that dream. Jacob would go on striving and grabbing, seeking to climb that ladder to heaven on his own.

Only after a lifetime of striving would Jacob finally understand the truth. The blessings of God were his from the very beginning. His striving only prevented him from enjoying and giving thanks for the journey.

I don't know about you, but there's a lot of Jacob in me. I look back on my life and see the undeserved grace of God. Over and over again God has been so good to me. What I thought was a wasteland turned out to be the house of God.

And how have I repaid the gracious care of this loving Heavenly Father?

Like the prodigal son, I have run away to the far country again and again. I strive to do things my way; I think that I must wring a blessing out of life instead of waiting for the blessing of God.

I try to run away from difficult situations and difficult people. I forget that cross-bearing is an integral part of discipleship.

But, like Jacob the time comes when I am too tired to run any more. And in that moment of blessed sleep, the dream comes back. It doesn't matter where I go or what I do, God in Christ is with me.

There is a plan and purpose for my life; God's dream is always greater than my small imagination.

THE DREAM AND WORSHIP

In a way, that's why we come to worship each Sunday. We are here to open ourselves up to the great mystery of life. We are here to dream.

No, I'm not commending those of you who seem to have a hard time staying awake during the sermon!

This is a dream that wakes us up.
This is a dream that makes us aware of God's hidden blessings.
This is a dream that reminds that every moment is sacred.

This is a dream that reminds us that there is more to our lives than just one thing after another.

We don't have to run away from those who would harm us.
We don't have to stuff our fears so deep down inside that we get ulcers.

We don't have to keep ourselves so busy trying to achieve things that we forget the greater blessing of what God gives us free of charge.

God's dream is a vision of a greater reality.
Hear the promise that this dream holds once again. God is with us. God cares for us ... in this world and the next. As the praise and worship hymn puts it, "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place." God is in this place, here and now.

This place is also called Beth-el. This is God's house. It is holy ground. This is also the place where we hear the promise of God's providential care, a promise that will see us through all of our life.

JESUS THE LADDER

Jesus once told his disciples, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heavens open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:51)

Those words are too close to the story of Jacob's dream to be used by chance. Jesus deliberately used this language to give the disciples a picture of what his ministry would mean.

Jesus is the ladder between heaven and earth. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

The dream that wakes us up is the dream that is given us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

A famous historian of religion told how ancient peoples used to construct their homes by driving a great stake into the ground. And then they would then build their homes around that center pole.

That center pole symbolized the center of their world. It gave their home a sense of order and purpose. When disasters struck they would rush to the center pole where heaven and earth were held together.

The ancients knew instinctively that every life needs a center, a touchstone that gives order and hope in good times and bad.

For the Christian that center is the empty cross. The empty cross is the symbol to which we turn when disaster strikes our lives. The empty cross, the symbol of the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the dream that God has given us. It is the dream that wakes us up to the meaning of true life.

On the cross we see that there is indeed a ladder to heaven. It is a ladder based upon the sacrifice of God's Son on the cross, the forgiveness of God and the promise of a new life, an eternal life.

THE NEED FOR A SABBATH

It is hard to find the center of life when we are bent on striving like Jacob. That's why God created the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not an opportunity to take a day off from our busy life at work so that we can be busy at home.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath means literally, "Stop it. Quit." In other words we need to "give it a rest" so that we might hear God's voice instead of just hearing the incessant voice of our own fears. We need to make time for worship

As the Psalmist put it, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) This reminds us that we awaken to a world that we did not create and a salvation that we do not earn.

Jesus told the raging wind and waves, "Peace. Be still." (Mark 4:39)

Jesus can also calm the storm in our lives. Throughout the gospels we hear him telling his disciples to give their anxious striving a rest.

Like Jacob we too need to give our anxious striving a rest. We need a dream that will save us even in the most violent storm.

A DREAM FILLED WITH GRATITUDE

Craig Barnes, a Presbyterian minister, tells the story of a parishioner by the name of Duane who was rushed to the hospital with a heart attack.

Duane was also a close friend and had even been on the pulpit committee that brought Craig to that particular church.

Craig sat for many hours in the waiting room with Duane's wife, Virginia. They prayed together and read some verses from the Bible. But, mainly they waited, waited desperately for some word, some vision from the Lord.

It came in the form of Duane's Day Timer. Virginia picked up the Day Timer and began to thumb through it. Duane was in the habit of worshipping God every day, and as a part of that worship he made a list of things for which he was most thankful. At the top of every list was the name Virginia.

Craig wrote, "Duane didn't survive the heart attack, but Virginia did. Knowing that she was dearly loved made all the difference at the end of Duane's life."

Craig went on to think about his own Day Timer. What would people find if his daily schedule was evaluated at the end of his life? He asked, "Would they discover that I, like Duane, used each day as an expression of gratitude? Or would they simply see a life that had been crammed into the half-hour slots on each page?"

I do think that gratitude is the key to worship.

Don't misunderstand. Our lives might not be particularly easy. Like Jacob we will do the wrong thing. We will have conflicts with family and friends. From time to time we will find ourselves alone in the wilderness.

But, once we have the dream that wakes us up, gratitude will always be a part of lives. Once we realize that God is always with us and will always give us what we need and more than we need for the living of these days, life will never be the same.

May God create a sacred spot in our lives.

May God give us a grateful heart.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN