

March 4, 2012
Lent 2

"Jacob's Ladder: A Dream Come True"

GENESIS 28:10-17

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it^[a] stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.^[b] ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

Let me introduce myself to you. My name is Jacob. I have a twin brother named Esau. He was born with red hair all over his body. Esau and I did not get along. He loved to hunt and hang around with my father Isaac. I was closer to my mother Rebecca. We were already jostling and fighting with each other in the womb. My mother asked the Lord what was wrong with the children she was carrying inside of her. The Lord told her that there were two nations in her womb, one nation would be stronger than the other, and older child would serve the young.

My parents named me Jacob because when I was born I came out of the womb immediately after my brother Esau and I was holding on to his heel. My name Jacob means the one who holds the heel or the one who trips up another person and deceives them. My brother Esau was much stronger than I was, but I was smarter. I deceived. One day when he came home from hunting in the field famished. I had just made some red stew and he was willing to sell me his birthright for a piece of bread and some lentil stew. I even tricked and deceived my blind father into giving me the biggest blessing by pretending to be Esau. I wore some of Esau's clothes and put goat hair around my neck and my hands. My father thought I was Esau and he gave me the biggest blessing before he died.

When Esau found out what I had done, he wanted to kill me. My parents sent me off to live with my uncle Laban in my mother's hometown of Haran. She wanted me to find a wife from her family because my brother Esau had married some wild Hittite women who caused my parents no end of grief and suffering. So here I am, with only a staff in my hand, sneaking off to the east to live in the land of Haran until my brother's anger subsides and it is safe to return home again.

Well, thank you Jacob for filling us in on some of the details of your life. That will help us look more closely at this amazing dream you had one night from the Lord that helped you through a very hard time.

Jacob slept on a stone

What a change Jacob experienced in his life as he set out from the land of Haran. "Jacob left Beesheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put under his head and lay down to sleep." Jacob has nothing, nothing but a few clothes to wear, a staff in his hand and a stone to put under his head as he falls into a deep sleep. He is exhausted from the journey and even more exhausted from sorrow. He had to say goodbye to his parents whom he dearly loved. They were wealthy people, extremely wealthy. He leaves it all behind to escape for his life to the land of Haran. Later he would come back and recall how poor he was with these words, "I had only my staff when I cross the Jordan River."

Perhaps you know some people who once enjoyed prosperity and now they have nothing. Retirement accounts reduced to nothing, homes lost to foreclosure, jobs terminated and people standing on the street corners pleading for money. Job was once the richest man in the east, and he lost all of his wealth in one day, then his ten children died when a storm knocked down the house where they were celebrating a birthday, and then he lost his health, and finally the respect of people in the community, and even his wife. At first he was able to say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." But then he started getting bitter and angry toward God for what had happened to him. I recall visiting a Jewish man who was dying of cancer. He retired early after investing in multiple homes in Santa Barbara. He said it was like manna falling from heaven, but then in the next breath he said, "God has done me dirt."

Where was the blessing? Jacob heard his father bless him with these words, "May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's riches- an abundance of grain and wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you." Tonight his head rests on a stone instead of soft pillow. He sleeps out on the open ground instead of a luxuriously appointed Bedouin tent. He fears for his life and all he owns is the staff in his hand. The man who is supposed to have everything has nothing. He falls asleep, exhausted in his body and exhausted from sorrow.

It has been said that the best pillow is a clean conscience. Some of Jacob's troubles have come because he and his mother have conspired to deceive Isaac and also Esau. Over the years it appears that Rebecca favored tender hearted Jacob and Isaac favored his manly son Esau. You know what happens in families when parents favor one child over the other. You know what happens when brothers and sisters deceive and cheat each other when it comes to the family inheritance or business. 1 Timothy 6 says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Jacob wanted that blessing. Oh, he how wanted it and he was willing to cheat and lie to get what he wanted. He was not willing to leave all of this in the Lord's hand to carry out the blessing as the Lord had promised. And so he walks, mile after mile, reliving what he has done in his past. Later he would confess to the Lord, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant."

Frank Sinatra once sang a song with the words, "I'll do it my way." That was Jacob's approach to life. Let's be honest. We struggle every day to live our lives God's way and not our way. We can point out the acts of deception in the life of Jacob, but then we see these little games we play inside of ourselves as we justify sinful thoughts and actions. The words of Jeremiah 17 apply to each of us as we honestly assess where we have come at this point in our lives. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

The Lord did not forget his servant Jacob, just as he did not forget Peter when he denied Jesus, or David when he committed adultery, or Job when he lashed out in anger against his God, or you and me when we were less than stellar in our integrity. "The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance."

The Lord spoke to him in a dream

It says here that Jacob reached a certain place. The Hebrew word used here for "reaching a certain place" is used in other parts of the Old Testament to describe an encounter or meeting with another person. The Lord knows where Jacob will be sleeping. He waits for that moment to encounter him in dream that Jacob will never forget.

"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway (or ladder) resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." God is speaking to Jacob through this dream and assuring him that heaven and his love and forgiveness are still open to him. When Jesus called Nathaniel to be his disciple he told him, "You shall see heaven open, and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Angels were there to announce Jesus' birth. Angels were there to announce Jesus' resurrection. God's Word tells us there is rejoicing among the angels over one sinner that repents. How many angels surround you every day to protect you but also rejoice over you that you are dear child of your heavenly Father. Jacob had this ladder with angels going up and down to remind him of the Lord's love for him.

You have something better than angels. You have the blessing of your baptism to assure you that you are God's dear children. You get to receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Holy Sacrament as you assure you have Jesus' body and blood for your forgiveness.

Jacob also heard the Lord speaking to him directly and restating the promise which had been spoken to his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac. The Lord says, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. Then the Lord promises to give him the land on which he is lying and a large number of descendants. Then he says, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." There it is. There it is. There is the red thread that runs through the whole Old Testament. It's the promise that one of the descendants from the Jewish nation will bless the whole world.

The Lord does more to help Jacob. He assures him, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised to you." Don't you love to hear the Lord speak to you here in

his Word and say "I will?" We can turn to verses in the Bible and hear the Lord say, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Jacob is overwhelmed by the Lord's kindness and mercy to him. "Surely the Lord is in this place." He describes it as the house of God and the gate of heaven. He even takes the stone on which his head rested and pours oil on it to set this place aside as a very special place where God spoke to him through this dream. Everything he heard in that dream from God came true for him in his life.

The Lord is in his love and mercy planned out this encounter with Jacob through this special dream of a ladder reaching up to heaven. Dear Christian, I ask you to reflect on all the special places the Lord has given you in your life, where you read something in his Word and it brought you close to the Lord's love for you and his promises which never fail you. I ask you to think of how the Lord is planning all these times in the future when he will speak to you here in his Word, or even remind of you of things you have read. Next to where I sleep, I have my Dad and Mom's Bible. It is well worn. A Bible such as this a good reminder of how the Lord plans all these special moments, these serendipitous moments, when he will speak to you in his Word. We can open this book and say, "Surely this is the house of God. Surely this is the gate of heaven." Amen.