

“Jacob’s Ladder”

Sunday, July 23rd, 2017

7th Sunday after Pentecost

#2 of 4: Jacob: God’s Unlikely Choice

 Genesis 28:10-19a (NRSV)

Jacob’s Dream at Bethel

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

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.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder [*or stairway or ramp*] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

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; 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. 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.”

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

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.”

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. He called that place Bethel.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

Ancient Mesopotamian cultures built shrines atop an impressive structure called a “*ziggurat*.”

This was a series of staircases numbering from two to seven.

They provided security for the temples and moved their rituals closer to the heavens.

Ancient Egyptians built tombs in the shape of a pyramid pointing to the heavens.

The idea was to represent the physical body emerging from the earth and ascending toward the light of the sun.

Genesis Chapter 11 tells the story of the descendants of Noah building the Tower of Babel.

They thought they could reach heaven through their own ingenuity.

God punished them for their arrogance.

In 1922, George Gershwin wrote “*Stairway to Paradise*” and put a new face on our reaching for the heavens.

It seems like we have been interested in finding our own way into heaven for a very long time.

This obsession relies on an understanding of God as some far-off, inaccessible being.

It leaves it up to us to make our way to where God is.

If you think about it, it reflects humanity's arrogance demonstrated by Adam and Eve in the Garden.

I think the lessons from these stories are different from that understanding and it is important for us to think about what sort of connection we have with God in "*the heavens*."

Let us pray... God in heaven, lead us this morning as we encounter an ancient story with a modern message. Help us to discern your message to us today. In Jesus' name, amen.

So, last week we met Jacob and saw that he wasn't exactly "hero material."

First, he conned his brother Esau out of his first-born son birthright.

Later, with the help of his mother, he tricks his dying father into thinking he *IS* Esau to get the final blessing that clinches the deal.

To say the least, Esau is very angry and he goes after Jacob with a vengeance.

Today's story shows us Jacob on-the-run.

He betrayed his brother and his father; he's afraid for his life.

Remember too, this is the guy who prefers to stay indoors and read; now he's out in the wilderness by himself, camping and fending for himself.

Jacob is miserable and he's caught between his contentious past and his very uncertain future.

I wonder if you can think of a time when you made a mistake, or did something wrong, and all you wanted to do was get away.

You didn't want to face the consequences, so you ran away.

Kids do it all the time.

Remember that vase that great-grandma gave to grandma who gave it to your mom?

It sat on the table in the formal living room where you weren't supposed to be playing.

Somehow that vase got knocked off that table and smashed; your next move is to run and hide.

In one way or another, we've all run away from something at some point in life.

I met a man once who was running away from God because he felt that the way he had lived his life was just too bad to be forgiven.

So, we talked about how God uses people from all sorts of backgrounds and life experiences to be messengers and even heroes.

Jacob is a great example of that; despite the things he did to dishonor himself and his family, God was able to use him.

So, what does this particular story tell us about our connection to God?

The “*certain place*” where Jacob makes camp for the night is in the middle of nowhere.

He is vulnerable, on the run, and sleeping outdoors; the danger is heightened by his nature as a quiet man, who prefers more civilized activities to hunting and camping out.

He lays down to sleep, but his rest is interrupted by a dream.

I don't know about you, but I have felt like I'm “*in the middle of nowhere*” more than once.

Maybe “*God-forsaken wilderness*” is a better term for it.

Think of a time when it seemed that nothing was going your way.

Maybe you felt lost in the midst of grief; maybe you were running away from a problem or a relationship.

Maybe your life was completely off-track.

That's the wilderness.

The wilderness in this story is wherever we end up when we are trying to escape from something and we have no idea what the next thing will be and we're stuck in a place where we feel like we are completely alone.

Here in this wilderness, we stop, exhausted and hopeless, completely vulnerable.

For Jacob, his dream shows him a vision of the earth and heaven being connected, right there in the midst of his wilderness.

It's not that Jacob gains access to heaven himself, nor does he escape his circumstances; it is a way of demonstrating God's immanent presence, rather than a far-off God removed from us by time and space.

What's remarkable about this vision is that it is a surprise encounter initiated by God.

It is God who recognizes Jacob in his hopelessness and comes to him with assurance.

God came to Jacob to reassure him that the promise made to Abraham and Isaac are still in place for Jacob and his descendants.

*“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; 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. **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.”*

Now, we know that this was a big deal for Jacob because of the culture in which he lived.

This was the legacy of the man who would be re-named by God, “Israel.”

It is a powerful reminder that Jacob’s life should not be governed by self-interest, but by

becoming a conduit of God's blessings to others.

When Jacob wakes from his dream, not only has the wilderness been changed by God's presence, but Jacob is a changed man.

He professes God's presence in this place that is on the way to where he was going.

He establishes "Bethel," a House of God to remember the life-altering encounter with God.

This is so much more than an ancient story; this is a story of how God initiates his presence with us just when we are at the worst wilderness places of our lives.

God renews our spirits and reminds us of his promises.

God transforms *our wilderness* into a special place that becomes sacred space.

God transforms us as we move out of the wilderness and into the future that God has promised.

Even though Jacob has done terrible things in his life,
God becomes his traveling companion.

We notice that God offers no judgement regarding
Jacob's past.

God simply transforms Jacob into a richly blessed
man who serves as a source of God's blessing
to others.

The lyrics of U2's song "Yahweh" offers an
interesting perspective on this ability of God to
transform ordinary people into something
special:

*"Take this soul
Stranded in some skin and bones
Take this soul and make it sing."*

The story of Jacob's Ladder shows us the truth of
God's reality that breaks into our world of fear,
terror, grief, and loneliness.

It allows us to imagine an alternative way of being
in the world, as we are enveloped by God's
presence that transforms us.

John Wesley reflected on this scripture and suggested that Jacob's dream was a way for God to assure him that, no matter what, he had a good guide and a good guard. God was both leading him and protecting him along the way.

This is a perfect message for us today as we try to navigate through a hostile world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**