

“Climbing the Ladder”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
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Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³And 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; ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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.” ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷And 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.”

¹⁸So 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. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”

Today’s lesson from Genesis is one of the great stories of the Hebrew Bible. It has inspired incredible paintings, beloved hymns, even memorable rock lyrics. It has fired the imagination of people throughout the ages.

I love this passage because of its vivid nature, its ability to make me feel that I am part of what is happening, even if I am only a silent spectator. I am able to see in my mind the whole tableau, perhaps in part because of that aforementioned art, perhaps because God gave each of us the facility of imagination. Jacob, the angels, the ladder, the barren waste, the rock-as-pillow are all there, in all their wonderful, gritty glory. The only one I don’t see is God. Yet I know God is there, too. Though not visible to me, his voice is clear, his presence palpable. But what does this all mean? What is this passage telling us? In short, the story recounts not only a remarkable vision of one man but a pivotal moment in the formation of a people’s identity.

We do not focus on Jacob so much in church. Yes, we remember that he was one of the three patriarchs, but he is not like Abraham, the heroic if flawed progenitor of Israel. And he is not like Isaac, the son who was almost sacrificed. Jacob instead is a bounder, a chancer, a crook, a cheat. His name could be translated in English as “to follow, to be behind” and also “to supplant, circumvent, assail, overreach,” or as derived from the word for “heel.” “Grabbing the heel” summarizes the intrauterine struggle he had with his older brother Esau. Recall that Jacob swindled Esau of his birthright, offering a lousy bowl of porridge in exchange when the latter was famished, and hoodwinked his aged, blind father into giving him his blessing.

And what comes of all this? A sense of betrayal—clearly on the part of Esau, who was driven into a murderous rage, seeking to slay his wayward brother. But one also wonders how the old man Isaac felt. He had been subjected to the bait and switch, first by his father when he was a youth and was about to be offered up as sacrifice until God intervened, and then late in life by his own son with the connivance of his own wife. There seems to be an unspoken lesson here about the fallibility, the unreliability of human promises, which becomes only stronger when contrasted with the covenant the Lord will strike with the fleeing con artist.

So, here we have Jacob on the run, in the middle of nowhere, heading back to Haran, the place his grandfather left all those years ago. He must have been hungry, perhaps stressed, even paranoid. He was definitely tired.

I suspect that those of you who like to go camping probably use a sleeping bag, maybe even a tent, and you might bring along a small pillow. Even if you like to dispense with these creature comforts and rough it, I doubt you put your head on a rock when you go to bed!

But Jacob did, and somehow he slept.

And that is when things got really interesting!

For it was when he fell asleep, when he surrendered any semblance of control, that Jacob was able to finally meet the God of his fathers.

Now, I am not an expert on dreaming, although I, like you, have plenty of experience dreaming and know about things like REM sleep and the importance of dreams in some areas of psychoanalysis. More than that, I know that in the Bible, dreams are where visions often take place: think of Joseph and his dreams, both that which landed him in a pit when he angered his brothers and those which seized the attention of Pharaoh. Dreams are a place, a time, when we are unburdened of the shackles of our normal way of seeing things. They are the place where our subconscious can roam and be free.

Our dreams may be anodyne, like those in which we dream of being on vacation or with someone we love, or they may be a way for our anxieties to express themselves, like those dreams people may have about not wearing pants at work. I still remember the one where I was in class and the dean of the law school called on me—and you’ll recall that I never went to law school, but the dean was my boss, and I was handling his reunion. Clearly, I was worrying that something would go wrong and I would be held accountable! And then there are the dreams that are just surreal, like a Dali painting come to life in our heads, and try as we might, they just don’t make sense.

But what of Jacob’s dream, his vision? What should we make of it?

Well, first let’s look at the ladder.

It may actually be a ramp.

You may recall the word *ziggurat* from history, Sunday school, or perhaps Scrabble. Ziggurats were the stepped temples built by the Mesopotamians; it has been argued that the fabled Tower of Babel was one. Similar temples have appeared in other cultures, too, like the Aztecs who flourished in Mexico. Ancient ziggurats usually had a ramp allowing access to the top of the structure. The summit was traditionally restricted to the king, for he was believed to be the divinely sanctioned ruler of his people. So, here we have the depiction of a familiar motif, the connection between heaven and earth. But what is unique in Jacob’s dream is that the interplay between the divine realm and that of humans seems so much more open, with angels—those would be God’s messengers—freely traveling between the two places. Furthermore, when the Lord speaks, Jacob remains on the earth below. I don’t believe that this is to suggest an unbroachable chasm between God and man, but that God comes to Jacob, thus closing the distance the two.

One reason I prefer the translation “ladder” to “ramp” is that the former dispenses with the royal associations of the latter. There is no temple here, just the means of going up and down. And that suggests that while we humans sacralize places, God will not be contained. I believe this a particularly welcome piece of knowledge at this point in time when we are unable to gather in our church. *God is with us wherever and however we gather.*

And I believe that it is this idea of God’s presence, God’s being with us, that is at the heart of this story. Jacob was no king, no royal personage. He was a scoundrel, a cheat. And yet God came to him to renew the covenant he had established with his forebears. This was not the norm when establishing such an arrangement—the sovereign did not come to the supplicant. But here the creator of the universe sought out this fallen man to let him know that he was not alone, that he was, in fact, blessed.

We see this often in Scripture, how the lowly, the troubled are picked out by God for special attention. Think of Moses, think of David, think of Jesus; they are not the ones

marked for success or preference, but they are the ones God chose to use to show his commitment to his people—and, in the case of Jesus, the one God chose to become so that he could be with us.

One idea that we moderns can find troubling is the idea of hierarchy. We claim to want everyone to be equal, the same, and the notion that anyone might be above us rankles. Somehow, we even have trouble seeing God as above us.

Look at the reading again, particularly verse 13. The New Revised Standard Version says that “the Lord stood beside him,” referring to Jacob. But that just as easily could have been rendered “above him,” and given what Jacob dreams, it makes sense that God would be above him, not by his side. Here again, we see heaven reaching out to earth, not stressing the differences but seeking to heal a rift. We humans could do with some humility, which would allow us to realize just what a great gift, what a remarkable blessing it is that the One who created all, the ruler of the cosmos, would seek out humanity and choose to enter into a covenant with our ancestors and with us.

One would expect that Jacob was transformed by this attention. The no-good bum chosen by God was still a worthy recipient of God’s grace, and from that moment history would be changed.

We know that Jacob’s response when he woke up was to be scared, to see that what had happened when he couldn’t game the system was far more incredible than anything he might have imagined possible. And so, he consecrated that place, and the location once known as Luz became Beth-el, the House of God.

God required no ziggurat or temple, just a faithful heart. His presence could make holy even a rock that had been used as a pillow.

But Jacob did more than recognize the importance of the place; he responded to God’s gracious covenant with a promise of his own. Some commentators have noted that Jacob began his vow with the word “if”—as if he were still bargaining. I don’t know that I buy that. I prefer the reading that says he was simply using the standard formula of a covenant. What matters, I believe, is that Jacob had responded to God’s outstretched hand with his own, cementing the relationship between the Creator and the one he created.

Jacob left this place a new man. We know that later, after wrestling with a divine messenger at Peniel, he would be given a new name, *Israel*, meaning “the one who has struggled with an angel.”

And we know that this is the name that was to be used by the people who were his descendants. Though their relationship with their God would be contentious and marked by heartbreak, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the people of Israel—would

know that they were descended from not only slaves but a common huckster. There would be no room for preening or boasting, not if Israel was to be honest with itself. But more than outweighing any shame they may have had about their roots, Israel would know that they were God's covenant people nonetheless. It was their long connection with God, through the patriarchs and judges, the kings and prophets, the good and the fallen, that endured throughout the ages and defined them.

The promise made to Jacob was also made to his heirs: a commitment that he would father a great and numerous people, that they would be a blessing to the nations, and that God would be with them through thick and thin.

We Christians have a habit of reading the Hebrew Bible through a Christocentric lens. What would be called cultural appropriation of any other people's holy text and sacred history is in this case brushed off, seen as the Church's right. But where has that led the gathered body of Christ? We have 2,000 years of ugly history to deal with, two millennia of persecuting our elder siblings in the faith of the one true God for which to answer.

One response would be to say, "Oh well, it's too late now. Let's just move on." Another would be for Christians to put on their hair shirts, and to wail and mope about how bad they are. But a third course is also available: to truly rely on God's grace, to make amends for past behavior, and to recognize that if God was able to forge a relationship with someone like Jacob, there just might be hope for us, too.

But we need to be sincere. Notice that Jacob's response involves an offer of personal sacrifice, a tithe. He was willing to offer something real to back up his words. This is a time for the Church to do likewise, whether it is working for racial justice, or wanting to heal Creation, or, yes, own up to what it has allowed to happen to its Jewish brothers and sisters right up until the present moment.

We learn from the eighth-century-B.C. prophets that Israel was exceptional—and that meant that more was expected from them, not that they would receive preferential treatment. They were called to be a light unto the nations, a servant people. If Christians truly wish to be heirs to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they will remember this truth, taking it into their hearts and praying that they will be blessed by visions like the one Jacob had in the desert—of a new future where heaven and earth are joined in the love, grace, and peace of the God who made us all.