

July 23, 2017 – Jacob’s Ladder

Genesis 28:10-19a

This is a story of Jacob. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah. And Jacob had a twin brother whose name was Esau. If you remember, we were introduced to these two characters last week. What happened between Jacob and Esau is last week’s reading? (*wait for answer – Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew OR Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright*)

There was a law in those days that said the brother who was born first would receive the biggest share of his father’s wealth. This was Esau’s birthright. Even though Esau had already sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew, it was pretty obvious that Isaac, still planned to give Esau his blessing. So Esau was going to get nearly all of their father’s estate. Jacob was jealous and Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, agreed that he wasn’t being treated fairly.

So Jacob and his mother decided to steal Esau’s birthright again. One day, when Isaac, their father, was old and nearly blind Rebecca dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothing. Jacob went into Isaac’s tent pretending to be Esau and Isaac gave Jacob his brother’s birthright. When Esau realized what had happened, he was so angry that he vowed he would kill his brother. Rebekah feared for Jacob’s life and she sent him away to visit her brother in a place called Haran.

So a lonely and frightened Jacob started off on his journey from Beersheba to Haran. That first night he lay down with only a stone for a pillow. And as he slept, he had a dream. In his dream he saw a ladder standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven and he saw angels, messengers of God, going up and down the ladder.

OK, let's stop there and ask ourselves – why did Jacob dream of a ladder between earth and a heaven way up in the sky? First of all we need to understand Jacob's view of the world. Jacob lived in a time when people believed that the world was flat and that heaven could be found above the clouds. So it made sense that, if a ladder was long enough, it would be able to reach heaven. And, of course, heaven was the place where God lived. Jacob and his family believed in a God in the sky, an untouchable God, a God that could best be reached on a mountain top or by climbing a very long ladder.

That view of God and heaven hasn't changed a lot in many Christian circles. In fact, when I was a child we sang an African-American spiritual with the words, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder." If that reference is too antiquated for some of you, you may be more familiar with Led Zeppelin's hit from 1971, "Stairway to Heaven." Both of these songs use that same image to indicate an upward movement toward heaven. There's nothing wrong with that image, it can be a very helpful analogy, as long as you realize that heaven is probably not a mansion in the sky.

So yes, there were messengers of God going up and down the ladder, but in his dream Jacob didn't actually climb the ladder. Instead, the scripture tells us that in Jacob's dream "YHWH was there, standing over him." God was there on the ground with Jacob talking to him. God told him that he would have many descendants and, even more importantly, YHWH said, "Know that I am with you, I will keep you safe wherever you go." These had to be incredibly comforting words for a man who was running for his life.

Then Jacob woke up and said, "Truly, YHWH is in this place and I never knew it!" Jacob and his family lived in a land where they were the only people who worshipped YHWH. Jacob was surprised that he would find God in a land filled with pagans, filled with idol-worshippers. He always thought that God lived in heaven and only showed up on earth in holy places, in the midst of a gathering of worshipping Hebrews. What was God doing here in this place, with him?

It's amazing where God shows up. I've had encounters with the Holy Spirit in some pretty strange places: in basements, in canoes and even while driving my car. During our Community Learning Time I asked you where God was and you gave me lots of answers. But what are some the strangest, most unexpected places where you have found God?

The next morning, when Jacob got up, he "took the stone he had used as a headrest and set it up as a monument, and anointed it with oil." Then Jacob named the place Bethel which means the house of God. Since he had

encountered God in this place, Jacob believed it was special, that it was sacred. Jacob believed that this was a place where God lived.

Like Jacob many of us tend to think that God only shows up in churches, in traditional “houses of God.” It does often seem easier to feel God’s presence in beautiful sanctuaries, like the one we are in right now. But God is with us wherever we are. God is with us in the bathroom, in the garage, at work, at the park, when we are sleeping and even when we pray. God is with us when we are celebrating and when we are grieving. God is with us when we are feeling courageous and when, like Jacob, we feel frightened and all alone. God is with us when we feel like a million bucks and when we are aching in every bone in our body.

God is with us in all places and in all times. So let us sing a song about God’s presence in our lives.

Hymn: VU #278 In the Quiet Curve of Evening

(please remain seated)