

“Ladder Climbing”

Genesis 28:10-19a

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Ladder climbing. That is the story of Jacob.

We know what ladder-climbing is, of course, even if the Internet and Webster’s has yet to define it. Consider these characteristics for aspiring corporate folks from www.michaelpage.com:

- Determination to succeed whatever it takes
- Ruthlessness to have an impact
- Making sure the successes are logged to you and the failures to others
- Looking very active and fast-moving

Jacob’s ladder was the one that anyone in the ancient Near East wanted to climb to get ahead: the family ladder. And few passages have equaled the power of Jacob’s dream when his ladder came crashing down. Why: because Jacob’s story reflects the human condition.

Let’s start with some family history. Mom and Dad’s mischief, Isaac and Rebekah, played favorites between the twins born to them: *“Isaac loved Esau...but Rebekah loved Jacob.”* (Gen. 25:28).

The very name Jacob means “the one who supplants” and he supplanted his brother Esau by getting Esau to sell his birthright. Esau was born first and entitled to the rights of the first-born: not just money, but headship of the family in its covenant with God. But the day came when hunter Esau failed to find game. Returning “famished” from the quest he demanded some stew that homebody Jacob had made. Ready to turn his brother’s weakness to his advantage, Jacob agreed: in exchange for Esau’s birthright. (Gen. 25:29-34).

Later, as their father Isaac was at the point of death, Jacob and his mother conspired with trickery and deceit to make Jacob look and smell like Esau to the nearly-blind Isaac. The purpose was to get the father’s

blessing of the first-born (Gen. 27). While these honors of birthright and blessing may seem quaint to us, they were considered of life-changing importance in the ancient world. Hear the story when Esau realizes he has been cheated out of his blessing: *“he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, ‘Bless me, me also, father ...have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!’ And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.”* (27: 34, 38).

But Esau was not only grief-stricken, he was angry: *“Now Esau hated Jacob...and [he] said to himself... ‘I will kill my brother Jacob.’”* (27:41). On his mother’s advice, Jacob runs away from his angry brother Esau. He journeys east—the only Old Testament patriarch to do so—a reverse of what his grandfather Abraham had done. So Jacob—trickster, scoundrel, liar, thief—comes to a rich end with his family ladder climbing. Now he journeys to his unknown uncle Laban’s land, sleeps in the desert, alone for the first time, traveling alone.

Jacob had to be broken, desperate, afraid. When was the last time YOU used a stone as a pillow?

“Nearer My God to Thee” is often associated with death or the sinking of the Titanic. But this hymn is really Jacob’s story. The wistful seeker after God identifies himself as “the wanderer” when, “the sun gone down,” darkness was over him and his “rest a stone.” Sometimes we feel in spiritual exile, poor, lonely travelers through an empty land. Or, worse, like Jacob, the wandering and emptiness are filled with guilt and burdens and remorse. He did not deserve a vision of God, did he? But he needed it; and in some admittedly selfish and groping and unworthy way he had yearned for it.

It is here that God—his father’s God, a God of which he seems to have no awareness—comes to him. Communication with God was not broken despite all that had happened. God comes. In a dream. A ladder-climbing dream. Only this ladder reaches to heaven, angels ascending and descending. And then the Lord stands beside him, extending again the promise given to his father and grandfather: *“the land on which you lie I will give to your offspring; and your offspring*

shall be like the dust of the earth...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you...for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.” (28:13-15)

In the midst of evil and ignorance there is still the possibility of a saving revelation. We need this, do we not, as we stand slightly farther than a stone’s throw from Jonathan Law high school and the murder of Maren Sanchez not yet three months old. We need a revelation in a sung prayer: “Yet in my dreams I’d be nearer my God to Thee, Nearer to Thee!”

But so what? Ah, here is where the awareness of God in his life breaks through, where the waves of recognition wash over Jacob: “*Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!*” (28:16)

“*And then he was afraid,*” the text tells us (28:17b). Several of us were headed to my office after church last Sunday for a planned meeting, and the one said to the other, “It feels like going to the principal’s office, doesn’t it?” They were joking and we laugh, but there is in all of us, I think, a sense of insecurity and perhaps even unworthiness in the presence of what we perceive as holy. Certainly Jacob felt it as fear. But also awe: “*How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*” (28:17b)

In recognition, in gratitude, he takes his pillow-stone and raises a monument, a stake in the ground, if you will. Here, here, I have experienced the mighty God! In a sense it is at THAT moment that Jacob wakes up from his dream and recognizes God. For now the beauty and holiness and mystery of God’s intervention becomes honored in a concrete act. It calls to mind the verse from a hymn we sang a few weeks ago. You need to know that the word “Ebenezer” is a noun meaning “stone of help.” The verse declares:

*Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’m come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” UM Hymnal #400

Anointing the stone with oil, he declares that this truly is a holy place. A safe place. Away from the anger of his brother and, for a time, the consequences of his behavior: until the day of reckoning. That, if you're interested, is found in Chapters 32 and 33 in Jacob's wrestling with God at the Jabbock River and coming face-to-face with Esau.

But for now, for today, it was enough for Jacob to realize that God was with him. Safely to arrive at home. Bethel. Beth-El. He called the name of the place "Beth-el." House. House of God.

And you? And me? This, too, is a holy place. Can we, as we sang a few moments ago, "feel God's mighty power and his grace?" Can we "hear the brush of angels wings?" Do we see "glory on each face?" That's what faith is all about. What ladders are we climbing? What ladders are we dreaming about? Are they bringing us home?