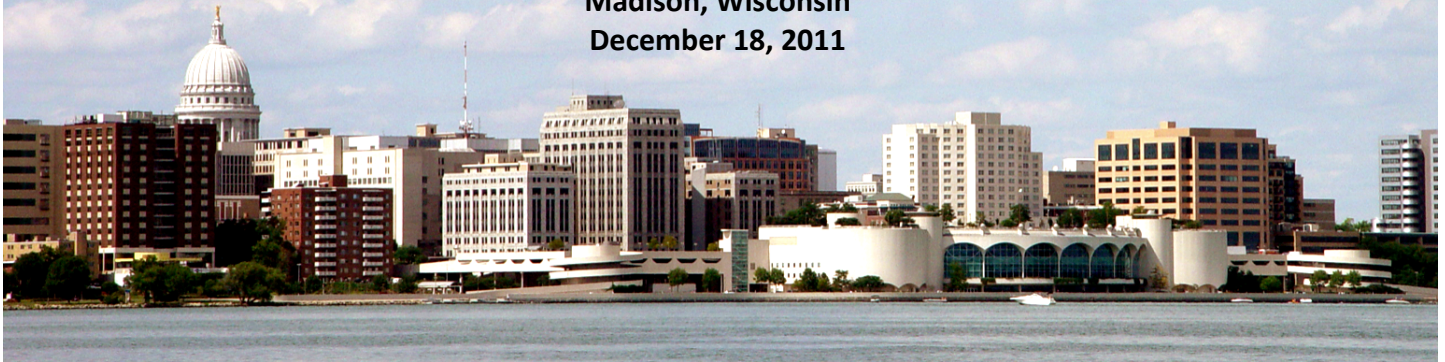


“Jacob: Stairway to Heaven”

GENESIS 28:10-22

**Baxter T. Exum (#1145)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
December 18, 2011**



Over the past few weeks, we have been looking together at some of our spiritual heritage, and we have been thinking very specifically about the fact that God has often identified Himself in the Scriptures as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We hope to look into this a little bit deeper next Sunday morning, if the Lord wills, but two weeks ago we started by looking at one of the most dramatic scenes from the life of Abraham. We learned that Abraham was a man of great faith, and he proved his faith to God in Genesis 22 as he offered his son Isaac on the altar. We learned that he passed the test, and then we learned that God blessed him by not only providing a ram as a last-minute substitution, but also by renewing the covenant, the promise that God would bless all the nations of the earth through one of Abraham's descendants, which, of course, was a reference to Jesus. We then studied some of the amazing parallels between the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Last week, we continued by looking together at a turning point in the life of Abraham's son, Isaac. We discovered that Isaac faced some serious challenges, we learned that Isaac was incredibly patient throughout that process, we learned that he turned out to be a great blessing to his neighbors, and then we learned that Isaac, like his father, became a worshipper of God. We learned that Isaac was not necessarily a hero, there was no huge defining act of sacrifice in his life, but he was a regular guy, like many of us here this morning. Isaac stuck with it over the long haul and kept on doing what he needed to do.

This morning, I would like for us to move on and consider a defining scene in the life of Isaac's son, Jacob. And without even looking at the Scriptures, many people would be able to identify the story of Jacob's Ladder, or, as it is sometimes referred to, the Stairway to Heaven.

- I am not, of course, referring to one of the greatest and most-requested rock songs of all time! While doing thorough research, I obviously had to listen to the song at least two times this week...and it is truly a great piece of music! I asked brother Black to lead it this morning, but apparently it is not in our songbooks.
- I am not referring to the little contraption that many of us made at summer camp when we were kids.
- I am not referring to the science experiment. I am not referring to the horror movie featuring Tim Robbins that came out back in 1990.

- I am not referring to what I might describe as the torture device recently featured on the show Biggest Loser.
- I am referring, of course, to the scene from Jacob's life that is recorded for us in Genesis 28 (p. 44). As is rather obvious from popular culture, most people have at least some idea that there was a man named Jacob who at some point dreamed of a ladder (or a stairway) to heaven.

However, what many people may not realize is that Jacob had a very difficult life. In fact, we might even say that his early life was rather twisted, and it started from the very beginning. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers, and Esau was born first; however, as Esau was being born, he did not come out alone, but he came out with Jacob firmly grabbing on to his heel! The name Jacob, in fact, means "one who takes by the heel," "one who grabs and takes the place of another," and the idea is that Jacob is someone who is very ambitious, even to the point of maybe tripping another person to get what he wants. As Jacob and Esau grew up, they were twins, but they were very different. Esau was a man of the wilderness, a hunter, an outdoorsman, and we also find in the Scriptures that Esau was especially loved by his father (Isaac). On the other hand, Jacob was more of a "momma's boy." The Bible tells us Jacob loved to hang out in the tent with his mother (Rebekah). Jacob would never hunt for the food, but he would hang out with his mom and cook the food. So you can see these two young men were very different.

Well, it always bothered Jacob that his older brother (older by just a few seconds) would be getting most of the family inheritance. So, with his mother's help and prodding, Jacob (symbolically speaking) took his brother by the heel once again and devised a way to trick him out of the birthright. Most of us remember how Esau came in from hunting one day and was just starving for a good meal. Well, Jacob arranged a trade: I will give you this nice bowl of soup, and from now on I will be the firstborn. Esau took the bait. And then, a little later in life, as Isaac was getting up in years, Jacob (again with his mother's help) dressed up like Esau (in a disguise), and tricked his dad into giving him the main blessing instead of giving it to Esau, the son he really loved. And so, as you can imagine, at that point, Esau is just irate. Isaac is irate. But the Bible tells us that Esau bore a grudge. In fact, the Bible tells us that Esau made plans that he would actually kill his younger brother. Mom gets wind of this, and warns Jacob, and Jacob makes a run for it. He goes out under the guise of looking for a wife (and that is part of it), but in reality, Jacob is running for his life, and we know this because he leaves home with nothing but a walking stick and the clothes on his back. And that is where we pick up with Genesis 28:10-22,

¹⁰ Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, 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."

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took

the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top.¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz.²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “ If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear,²¹ and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God.²² This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.

As we think about what just happened here, I would like to divide the lesson into two thoughts. First, the fact that God revealed Himself to Jacob in the middle of a very difficult situation, and then secondly, the fact that Jacob reacted to God’s message with awe and worship. And as we study, I would like for us to constantly ask ourselves the “So what?” question: Why is this passage in the Bible, and what does it really mean for us?

I. **But first of all, let us notice that GOD REVEALED HIMSELF TO JACOB IN THE MIDDLE OF A VERY DIFFICULT SITUATION (verses 10-15).**

If we were to say that Jacob was at a low point in his life, that would be an understatement. He is a momma’s boy on the run, unaccustomed to camping out in the wilderness. He is on the run from his highly-skilled hunter brother, who is on a murderous rampage, having just been cheated out of his inheritance. Jacob is now very quickly traveling on foot from Beersheba to Haran, a distance of just over 400 miles. But as he is roughly 50 miles into that journey, he stops for the night, maybe a day or two into it. And when he stops, the Bible tells us (in verse 19) that he is near a city, the city of Luz. However, it seems a little bit strange that he does not stay in the city. Normally, travelers were welcome to camp out just inside the gates of the city, where they would have protection from wild animals, protection from the elements, protection from thieves, and so on. Perhaps Jacob shows up after the gates of the city have been closed for the night, perhaps he just doesn’t feel comfortable being with other people at this point in his life, perhaps he was afraid that Esau would be looking for him in the cities, we don’t know, but we do know that he sleeps out in the open.

As he sets up camp, the Bible tells us that he takes a stone and puts it under his head. Some of you know that I love camping, I love going bike camping, but even as important as it is to pack lightly on a bike, I have always brought some kind of a pillow. I mean, a pillow is a basic necessity! If you do not sleep well, the trip home the next day will not be pleasant. Some of you, though, may have my dad’s viewpoint on camping. He says that the world’s worst hotel room is better than the world’s best tent. I disagree with my dad on that, of course, but Jacob does not even have a pillow, which is interesting. No tent, no supplies, no sleeping pad, no mosquito netting, nothing! Jacob is supposedly now the heir of the great wealth of Abraham and Isaac, but he is on the run, he is on a journey of roughly 450 miles, and has to use a rock as a pillow. Truly, Jacob is in a tough spot, a difficult time. On top of the physical challenges, Jacob is perhaps overwhelmed with a sense of shame, a sense of embarrassment. If we could try to put ourselves in his place emotionally, this would have been so hard—cut off from his mother, hated by his brother, having deceived his own father, lonely, rejected, and basically poor—not a good situation at all.

Maybe some of us can empathize with what Jacob was going through here—heading off to a new job in a far-off place and having our world turned upside down, losing a loved one to death, going from a house full of kids to an empty nest, working through a serious financial struggle, waiting by a bedside at one of our local hospitals, graduating from high school and heading off to college, waiting for test results—all of these things have the potential for getting us down.

Have you been there? Jacob has been there, but in the middle of it, just as things seem to be at their worst, Jacob goes to sleep, and as he sleeps, instead of having a nightmare about Esau chasing him down with giant knife, we find here that God steps in with a powerful message. In the dream, Jacob sees a ladder with the angels of God going up and down the ladder, and the Lord is standing above it. Now, there have been all kinds of things read into this, as to what the ladder really means, but for now, I'm fine with leaving it just the way it is. It is what it is. It is a ladder with angels going up and down on it. Because, as for the message, the Lord speaks—the Lord tells us the message. He identifies Himself as the God of Jacob's grandfather Abraham and the God of his father Isaac. God also tells Jacob that the ground he is lying on will be given to him and his descendants. Then, God repeats the promise that his descendants will be numerous, like the dust of the earth. He also repeats the promise that all the families of the earth will be blessed through one of Jacob's descendants. And then finally, God also makes a promise that He will be with Jacob, He will keep him safe on all of his travels, and he will bring Jacob back home to this land at the appropriate time. So, instead of being pursued by Esau, the message in the vision is that Jacob is actually being pursued by God. And this is what is truly amazing about this passage: God has a way of tracking us down even when we do not really want to be found. First of all, then, God has a way of finding us even in the most difficult circumstances. We praise God for that, that He has revealed Himself to us—which happens today through the written word of God, the Bible!

II. **There is something else we notice in this passage, and that is: JACOB RESPONDS TO GOD'S MESSAGE WITH AWE AND WORSHIP.**

And we see this in verse 16: As Jacob wakes up, he does not forget about the dream (as many of us do with normal dreams), but this dream changes his life, it gives him a completely new perspective, he wakes up and he does something about it. When he wakes up, Jacob does not say, "God came to this place," he does not say, "God was here," but he says, ***"Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."*** In other words, Jacob realized that God was already there. In fact, God had always been there, and God would always be there in the future. In the ancient world, most people had the idea that various gods were local gods, and so there might be one god over here and another god over here. Jacob, then, almost seemed a little bit surprised, "Wow, I am on the run, and God is here too!" Jacob, therefore, simply realized the fact that God was all around him, even though he could not see it at the time. And that is a wonderful thing to realize, that God is all around us, that God is everywhere. Imagine if we could go through each day, knowing that God was with us at all times, that God is sitting there at the desk with us, that God is standing next to us on the line, that God is with us in the truck or in the classroom or in the lab, that God is with us as we hang out with our friends, that God is with us at the dinner table—that right there is able to rearrange our priorities. Knowing that God is with us is able to change the way we live. And it certainly changed the way Jacob lived.

Up until this point, Jacob has not seemed very religious. In fact, back in Genesis 27:20, as Jacob was trying to explain why he came back with a meal so quickly (when he was pretending to be Esau), Jacob said to his father, ***"Because the Lord your God granted me success."*** Did you catch that? ***"The Lord YOUR God..."*** In other words, his father's God was not his God yet. But now, after this dream, Jacob says, ***"...the Lord shall be my God."*** Jacob, therefore, is starting to make it personal. He is on a spiritual journey.

He then goes further as he takes his pillow (the stone) and turns it into a kind of altar. He makes a pillar of stones and pours oil on top of the stone that he had slept on—an act of worship, a memorial—perhaps similar to the Lord's Supper, perhaps similar to the singing we do here—something we do to express our love for God, not out of obligation, but out of appreciation, out of respect for what the Lord has done for us.

And while we're here, I should point out the fact (according to verse 17) that Jacob was **"afraid."** Just so we are clear, Jacob was not afraid of God in the sense he was worried that God would come down and hit him, but rather, he is afraid in the sense of **"awe."** And with that sense of awe, Jacob (at the end) makes a promise: If God will be with him, then God will be his God—that pillar would be God's house, and Jacob would give a full tenth of his blessings back to the Lord. We don't have the rest of the story here, but many years later, Jacob would return to this place, and he would, in fact, finish building the altar that he started.

What I love about Jacob's attitude here is that God never tells him: You must build an altar! God never says: You must give me 10%! But instead, these are things that Jacob willingly and spontaneously offered. What a great attitude! This whole experience was a turning point. God grabbed Jacob's attention, and Jacob reacted with worship and sacrifice.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would like to go back (as I promised earlier) to the concept of a ladder. We know that ladders are useful tools. Ladders allow us to reach things we wouldn't normally be able to reach. Several weeks ago, I got up on our roof to add a bird screen to the chimney for our woodstove. I could not have done that without a ladder. Ladders bridge a gap. We think back to Jacob: Jacob might not have realized it at the time, but Jacob needed to bridge the gap. After everything that Jacob had done, there was a separation between God and Jacob. There was a gap in the relationship. Many years earlier, the people had tried to build a tower to heaven, the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. They saw the gap, and they tried to do something about it on their own terms, but that's not how it works. But rather, the ladder has to be set up by God. Earth cannot reach heaven; heaven reaches earth. As I see it, then, the image of the ladder was God's way of opening a channel of communication. God was saying: Jacob, I am here for you!

As we try to apply all of this to our situation today, I would like to point out an interesting little passage in John 1 (p. 1655). As Jesus was first starting to choose His disciples, He runs into a man by the name of Nathanael. In John 1:47, the Bible says that Jesus sees Nathanael coming towards Him and says (out of the blue), **"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"** I don't want to read too much into this, but I do want to point out that Jacob's name was later changed to Israel. The Israelites, then, are named after Jacob. Jesus, then, is basically saying: Look! A descendant of Jacob...in whom there is no deceit! Remember: Jacob was known for tricking and deceiving people. So, we have a contrast: Here is Nathanael, an Israelite, but unlike Jacob (the original Israelite), Nathanael is not a crook. The conversation between Nathanael and the Lord continues, but the Lord ends with an interesting statement (down in verse 51). The Lord said to Nathanael, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."** Isn't that interesting? I don't think it is too much of a leap to think that Nathanael and Jesus were both thinking about the scene that we have studied this morning. Remember: Angels were there at the birth of Christ, angels were there at His temptation in the wilderness as He began His ministry, angels were there as He suffered in the garden on the night before He died, angels were on standby at the crucifixion itself, angels were present at the resurrection, and angels were there when the Lord was taken back up in the clouds into heaven at the end of His ministry. And since this is the case, the message is that Jesus (through His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension) has permanently opened the stairway to heaven. To Nathaniel, then, Jesus said: If you follow Me, you will see angels. Jesus has opened up access to God. As the Bible teaches, He is our mediator. He is our go-between. He is the path, the way, the ladder to heaven.

As we look back to the original Jacob's Ladder, then, we start to see that it is more of a signpost, a giant arrow pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah, pointing forward to a ladder between heaven and earth that

will not fade away when we wake up in the morning, a ladder that is not just open to one person at a time. This morning, then, we stand with Nathanael and Jacob, looking at a stairway (or ladder) to heaven.

And so today, when we find ourselves in a stressful situation: alone, or in pain, or worried, or tired, or spiritually worn out, let's remember that the ladder is always there. Think about Jacob, as he runs away from home, he is hoping that he can come back in a few days (after Esau's anger dies down a little bit), but he has no idea that he will actually be gone for more than 20 years. He has no idea that he himself is about to be tricked, scammed into working many years by his future father-in-law, a man by the name of Laban. In Laban, Jacob met his match! But through those struggles, Jacob knows that God is with him, and it is something that makes him much stronger. No matter what we've done or where we may go, the ladder is always there!

According to our scripture reading this morning (from John 4), the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus, ***"You are not greater than our father Jacob, are you?"*** Oh yes, He is!

If you are not yet a Christian, we would like to invite you to consider God's message. God took the first step and opened up the lines of communication. He offered His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept that sacrifice by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you would like to talk about it further, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news immediately, we would invite you to let us know right now, as we stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com