

I bought a new ladder. I opened the instruction booklet and it only said, “Step One, then Step Two, then Step Three”... Never trust ladders. They’re always up to something.

This morning we’re going to study Jacob, his dream-ladder, and his faith, and what all this has to do with our own walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

GENESIS 28:10-17

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹²He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

The story of Jacob and his brother, Esau, is a great illustration of a family that needed a therapist! Their parents, Isaac and Rebecca, played favorites. Isaac favored his first born son, Esau, because he was a hunter. But Rebecca adored Isaac for he was homebody who loved to cook and work around the house.

The boys themselves were hardly recognizable as brothers. Esau was hairy all over, but Jacob’s skin was like porcelain. Esau was as dumb as a bag of nail, but

Jacob was as clever as a fox, as when he persuaded Esau to trade him his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup!

But it goes deeper. Esau married a foreign woman, contrary to the wishes of his parents. When he saw how much this grieved them, he went out and married another one, and then another one!

Jacob was no angel either. Besides tricking Esau into giving him his birthright, he and his mom conspired to trick Isaac. The old man was half blind, and he couldn't tell that it was Jacob dressed in animal fur and not hairy Esau when he gave Jacob his blessing for his firstborn son.

Yes, it was a dysfunctional family. We don't know how or why, but we do know that God got involved and he fulfilled his promise to bring forth a nation from the seed of Abraham despite the questionable antics of his offspring.

In this morning's lesson, we find Jacob on a journey, fleeing his brother's wrath for stealing his blessing from their dad. We read, **"When [Jacob] reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep" (v.11).**

A stone for a pillow? Talk about being between a rock and a hard place! Jacob was not a happy camper. In fact, it would appear, despite his cleverness and self-dealings, he lost, he failed. He was all alone. He had been separated from his family; he was forced to leave the land God promised to his father's father Abraham; his brother wanted to kill him; and everything he owned was loaded on the back of a donkey. If we analyzed this story with human reason, we would conclude that Jacob got what he deserved, that what goes around comes around.

But God was working. We read, **"[Jacob] had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over**

you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (vv.12-15).

As we’ve studied God’s relationships with people in the Bible, a recurring theme has been the faith of the people and how God tested their faith. For example, last week we talked about how Abraham obeyed God and prepared to sacrifice his son despite the illogic of the command. But that obedience grew over many years. Time and time again, God tested Abraham’s faith, and he failed. But the Lord kept working in his heart, and, ultimately, he demonstrated perfect faith in the wisdom, the promises, the unadorned, unadulterated Word of God. God’s will does not always line up with human reason, but it always prevails.

And consider King David. God promised him the throne of the king of Israel, and the prophet Samuel anointed him, and yet it was 10-years before he actually wore the crown. God’s Word was fulfilled according to the Lord’s timing.

God’s Word came to Jacob in a dream as his head rested on that rock. And the Lord gave him the same promise he had given his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham: Land, descendants as numerous as grains of sand on the Earth, and a blessing for all humanity. And he promised, **“I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.”**

God’s Word is powerful. **“[He] said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind....’ And it was so” (Genesis 1:24).**

God’s Word is truth. The Psalmist writes, **“The sum of your Word [O Lord] is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Psalm 119:160).**

Luther made the observation that the Lord allows man to hit rock bottom so that the origins of his work will not be misunderstood, so that man will never take credit for it.

Jacob had stolen his brother’s birthright, and he’d tricked his dad into giving him the blessing of the firstborn son. But despite his cleverness, none of it meant anything to him in the loneliness of the desert, in the dark night of his soul, in his literal poverty, until God’s Word came to him.

We read, **“When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ ¹⁷He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven’” (vv.16-17).** Jacob knew the stories about how God had revealed himself to Abraham and Isaac, but now in his poverty, God’s Word came to him too.

This is where God’s Word speaks to us. When we have nothing to hold on to, nothing to brag about, nothing to claim as our own, we can hear the Lord’s voice. St. Paul wrote that the Lord said to him, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ (And he responded,) Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2nd Corinthians 12:9).**

But Jacob was not transformed instantly. After his dream, he wasn’t sure what he believed. He knew Yahweh was there; and he recognized the promise as the same one his forefathers had received. But as the story continues, we see that he was not altogether certain about what this all meant.

In the morning, after his dream, Jacob took the stone he had slept on and made it into an altar over which he made a vow, saying, **“If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God” (Genesis 28:20-21).**

Jacob was still Jacob. Even after everything he had been through, he was still wheeling and dealing, even with God himself! Even demanding that God bless him before he would call him his Lord! Does the Lord roll his eyes at man’s preposterous and silly ideas and actions? If he does, this was one of those times.

We get it all upside-down. We find it impossible to believe that Holy God would reach down to us and speak to us, that he would care enough to answer our prayers, to protect us, and to provide for our families simply because he loves us.

Since we live by rules, we assume God lives by rules, and so we create a list of rules that prescribe certain behaviors which we believe will earn God’s favor. There are some preachers who say this outright. But we’re more subtle. We believe that if we wear a cross around our neck, God will bless us because we are

so brave with our public witness. We say table grace, because we believe God will be angry at us if we don't. We put money in the plate, believing that the Lord will bankrupt us if we don't OR he will give us more money if we do. We believe all kinds of weird stuff. We wheel and deal with God just as Jacob did.

And the Lord rolls his eyes. He's not angry. He does not withhold his blessing from us. Jacob did nothing to make himself worthy of God's grace, his mercy, his love. But God called him, nonetheless, and his faith grew out of this calling.

This is why I love the story of Jacob so much: God's Word prevailed despite Jacob's shenanigans. Day by day, this Word was fulfilled in Jacob's life, and his faith grew. He married and his wives gave him twelve sons. The Lord changed his name to Israel, for his twelve sons would one day be the twelve tribes of the nation Israel. God's Word prevailed, and Jacob's faith grew as this Word took hold of his heart.

Jacob uttered his most profound profession of faith when he was 147 years old from his death bed. But it was not a cry of desperation. Rather, it was a word of love and adoration, a word of anticipation and promise. It was a word that was rooted in faith, a life lived in God's Word. As Jacob prepared to bless his sons one last time, he said, **"The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads...."** (Genesis 48:15-16).

God had made himself Jacob's God just as Jacob had demanded in the beginning, and his faith grew into a faith that brought forth faith in his children, and in his children's children, and in a nation which brought forth his ultimate descendent, Jesus.

In the Hebrew, "Jesus" means "God saves." And so he does; he sent down his Holy Spirit, who dwells in our hearts, instilling in us grace by faith, a faith full of his Word, the Word of God which changes us, transforms us into children of God, heirs of the Kingdom, into servants of the King of Kings.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us take hold of this Word, God's promises, his truth, that we would be strong and withstand the devil and his empty promises.

Let us pray this Word that it would be real in our lives and church, that it would nourish our faith.

And let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.