



Poland Presbyterian Church

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**The second in a series by
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The Jacob Chronicles: Promised!

Genesis 28:10-19

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He 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. ¹² And 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. ¹³ And 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; ¹⁴ and 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. ¹⁵ Know 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." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ And 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 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. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

One of the challenges of preaching a series is that each sermon builds on the former, and one cannot be sure the congregation was present for the previous sermon. Television deals with this issue by beginning a serial with a quick 30 second overview of the previous show. Today, let's begin with a quick overview of last Sunday's message:

- Jacob was sneaky.
- He was a narcissist.
- He was lazy.
- He was selfish.
- He came from a dysfunctional family.
- He cheated his brother.
- He was smart and clever but he used his intelligence for his own gain.

His brother Esau was hungry, and Jacob traded a bowl of stew for his birthright. Later he completed the hat trick by deceiving his father into thinking he was Esau in order to steal the blessing that was reserved for his older brother. Esau was mad... really mad and threatened to kill Jacob. This would not be the first time in the Bible: remember Cain and Abel? So Jacob ran away. He fled from his brother Esau.

This is the second sermon in a series on the life of Jacob. So far one may wonder why Jacob is so important. We have discovered that God uses scoundrels, yet the question remains: how does God change a lazy, con artist like Jacob? How? Today we are going to look at one of the better known stories in the Old Testament. When I was a child we learned the song: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder... children of the cross." First I want to look directly at the account in Genesis. Second I would am going to show how Jacob's dream is the first step in his spiritual development. Finally, I want to look at the very nature of spiritual growth and maturity today.

I

The story begins with Jacob on the run. He was a fugitive from justice. He was running from his brother whom he cheated and humiliated. But should we be surprised? Jacob was a coward and cowards run away. But he was not merely running away from his brother, he was running away from his true self. He was a moral and psychological coward. He was trying to flee the reality of who he was. He was not going to take responsibility for his actions. So he ran away.

There is an expression: "you can run, but you cannot hide." Jacob does not know this yet. He believed that in fact he could hide, but the truth would reveal itself at night, when he slept. That is when all our defenses rest. That is when even the most selfish person is vulnerable to the power of conscience.

I remember as a child waking up because I couldn't sleep. I went downstairs where my mother was reading and told her that I couldn't sleep. She asked me "What did you do wrong?" I wondered how she knew! It was then that I learned about the human conscience. I can't remember what I did that caused me to lose sleep, but I learned the power of the conscience and the importance that it plays in our moral development. Many years later I learned the Presbyterian principle that "God is Lord of the conscience." When our conscience is bothering us it could be an encounter with God.

The conscience causes us to struggle, mentally, psychologically, and spiritually. These struggles of the soul often mug us in the night, when we are asleep. We wake up horrified, frightened, bothered, worried.. and can't get back to sleep. St. John of the Cross spoke of the "Dark night of the soul..." and I suspect that interrupted sleep and disturbing dreams are part of the struggles of the human spirit.

Jacob laid his head down and slept. Then he had a dream. The dream was of a staircase or ramp. It led from the very spot where he was sleeping into heaven. Angels or messengers from God were ascending and descending the stairs. That is the account that we have of the dream. It is not a complicated story or tale. Simply a vision of heaven joined to earth by a staircase. A staircase between earth and heaven: what could it possibly mean?

Does it not illustrate that heaven, the home of God, is not completely separated from the earth? Angels, messengers of God, move up and down the stairs, indicating that God is involved in human history and affairs. The realm of God is not separated from ours.

It is an ancient vision. Earlier in the book of Genesis, the people of Babel attempt to build a structure to connect the earth to the heavens. They were foiled in their attempt. Here we discover that such a structure already exists: a ladder hanging from the heavens, (with God) reaching down to earth. That is the direction of biblical encounters with the divine. They begin with God and move toward humanity. This staircase facilitated an encounter. **Jacob was about to encounter God.**

Until that moment, God was not part of Jacob's life. I went back and read the earlier accounts about Jacob's life and noted that there was little or no mention of God in them. God existed in those accounts only in the content of the blessing. Now, in this dream, God was powerfully present. Suddenly the story takes on a new dimension. We are not only witnessing accounts of things here on earth but also in heaven.

God revealed himself to Jacob. "I am *the Lord*, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac." In that one statement the generations are connected. Jacob's universe was enlarged. God, who revealed himself to Jacob that evening, was not a concept, not an idea, not a philosophical proposition. *The Lord was and is a God who is in relationship with people.* In that moment, the muddy mystery of history begins to clear. Jacob was no longer a scoundrel on the run. He was the heir of the promise that was offered to his grandfather Abraham. Jacob: a scoundrel, a cheat, a liar, and a con-artist, was claimed by God and a child of promise!

Jacob was awed by the dream. And when he woke he said: "Truly God is in this place." and he named it "Bethel" or house of God.

II

This is the beginning of a change in Jacob. The psychologist, John Sanford, wrote that there are three ways that a human being grows spiritually.

- The first is suffering; not merely physical suffering the suffering of the spirit; the struggle of the soul.
- The second is through a recognition of a power greater than our own that is at work in our lives.
- The third is by coming to care for someone. (*The third one will be the focus of the next sermon!*) We will see how these three transforming powers are present in Jacob's life.

First, he struggled. He was a child of comfort and luxury. He was a "Mamma's boy" and was always cared for by her. Now he was in a desperate situation. He was on the run. He had to make do for himself. He had to scavenge food. He had to do without all the comforts of life. He had to exist, by himself, in the wilderness. Ironically, Esau would have fared quite well in the wilderness, but this was new for Jacob and he was frightened.

His struggles in the wilderness were an outward manifestation of what was occurring deep in his soul. He was struggling with his identity, who he was. He was confronting the reality of his own shortcomings. Human struggles are not an antidote to egocentric selfishness, but they have a way of opening the soul to the transforming power of God.

Then he had the dream. Here God encountered Jacob. The narrative's language changes. We read that Jacob was "afraid and in awe." Why fear and awe? Because he realized that he was in the presence of a power, much greater than him. He realized that his cunning and deceit would be of no avail. He was forced to acknowledge that there was a power that had control on his life. What was the significance of this? Jacob, like most egocentric individuals was a control freak! He controlled events and manipulated people to his advantage. Now he knew that he was no longer in control, and there was a power greater than Jacob!

What was the effect of this? It began to break down his selfishness. He would soon begin to acknowledge that there were other people and other powers in the world beside himself. His egocentric attitude was bruised and now there was room in his life for God and others.

III

So what? This is an awesome story about a spiritual journey and the growth and development of the soul. It is an account of an encounter with God, and gives us five insights into divine encounters and spiritual growth.

1. We learn again an important lesson about human development and spiritual maturation. There is a t-shirt that says: "God isn't done with me yet." In this story we discover that God hadn't started with Jacob until that night in Bethel. Human beings, no matter what their history are never beyond the reach of God. Jacob's ladder reaches from God into our lives. God initiates an encounter with us. Human beings, egocentric, manipulating and immature ones like Jacob can grow and can mature. As I mentioned last week, this is a message of hope, and a warning to be careful in our judgments. We shouldn't write people off so quickly.
2. We learn that often the spiritual journey takes place beyond "our comfort zone." Jacob fled to the wilderness. There he was without bed, food, and other amenities. When he was there in the wilderness the divine encounter began. This is archetypal. Jesus sought the wilderness before he began his ministry. Some of the ancient religious communities were located in the desert or wilderness because the adherents believed that God was nearer. Today, we associate the wilderness with personal growth, be it scouts camping and practicing survival skills, to the "Outward Bound" experience. Christian educators tell us that retreats are important, because so much more can be accomplished when the participants are outside of their zones of comfort and familiarity. Our comfort may be the very thing that insulates us and protects us from genuine spiritual growth.

3. We learn the lesson that we have long thought true. The struggles of the soul are redemptive. The "dark night of the soul" can be a teacher that prepares the soul for transcendence and opens it to the divine.
4. We learn that maturity and growth involves the recognition of a higher power in one's life. This recognition often takes place within a powerful encounter, and it is both frightening and awesome. Our spiritual struggles, our quest for identity, and our encounter with God have a way of breaking down the narcissism and egocentricity that governs our lives.
5. We discover the importance of awe. The Jewish mystic, Abraham Heschel wrote: "There is only one way to wisdom: awe. Forget your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a marketplace for you." The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe. Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith.

"We are climbing, Jacob's ladder..... It is a ladder that is not planted in the earth, but rather is anchored in heaven with the divine... we climb it fearfully... each step involves struggle, loss, and even pain. Each step, requires us to let go of our self-centered narcissism. Each step, higher and higher, brings us closer to the divine, and when gaze from that ladder... Jacob's ladder, our vision fills us with awe and wonder... and we realize that we are indeed, children of promise. This is the good news. Amen.