

Pentecost 10

July 20, 2008

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One of the interesting realizations about the use of the Revised Common Lectionary for worship is that it follows some of the wonderful Old Testament stories through from start to finish. One of those stories is the story of Jacob. Last Sunday we heard that Jacob and Esau were born when Isaac and Rebekah were older. The boys struggled in the womb before they were even born to the point that Rebekah asked God, "If being pregnant is like this why do I live?" God answered her that the boys represented two nations and those two nations were destined to struggle. Esau was the first of the twins to be born and when Jacob was born he was holding on to his brother's heel trying to prevent Esau from being the first born.

Esau grew up to be a skilled hunter. He was a man's man and the apple of his father's eye. Jacob on the other hand hung around the tents with the women and was a favorite of his mother. One day when Jacob was making a stew he tricked his brother Esau into trading his birthright as the first born for a bowl of stew. Then he swindled Esau out of his father's blessing with an outright lie.

Today when we read about Jacob he is on the run. Esau has vowed to kill his brother. Their mother, Rebekah, intervenes and sends Jacob to her brother Laban on the pretense that he is looking for a wife. Jacob is really not the kind of guy you want your daughter to bring home. I am not sure you would even want him working with you in an office. He certainly is not worthy of being trusted.

So, Jacob fled his home as fast as he could. He does not seem to be very prepared for his travels because as the sun goes down he searches for a rock to use as a pillow. Jacob falls asleep. He has a dream of "a ladder set up on the earth; the top reaching into heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Then Jacob dreamed that God spoke to him promising to be with him and keep him safe. Up to this time Jacob was not much into the religion of his fathers. He relied on his own devices to take care of himself and achieve that which he wanted.

Do you think God speaks to people in dreams? If someone came up to you and said God told me in a dream, wouldn't you wonder if that person was all

there? Most dreams are a mix of day old worries, odd memories or events that never make sense. It seems in the Bible that God does quite a bit of talking to people in dreams. God spoke to Pharaoh in a dream, now he had to get Joseph to interpret the dream in order to get God's message. God spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary and her child and flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. Peter has a dream in which God tells him that Gentiles can be part of the following of Jesus as well.

Jacob's dream is one of the most important dreams in the entire Bible. God promises in Jacob's dream, "the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread abroad to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south and all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your offspring." A pretty amazing dream. This lying, cheating fugitive will have land as far as he can see and descendants too numerous to number. I will protect you forever is what God said to Jacob.

Where is this place that Jacob found to sleep? This pulled together campground where a fugitive collapsed using a rock for a pillow, is it on earth or the gate of heaven? Jacob is awestruck himself. Jacob gets up and pours oil on the rock. He sets up a pillar, promises to tithe to God 10% of all he ever has, and never to let his children forget this spot where God spoke to him. Later in the story we will find that Jacob wrestles with an angel and has his name changed to Israel meaning, "one who wrestles with God." He calls the place where he lay "Bethel" a Hebrew word translated "house of God." Among the Jewish people, Bethel is commonly used to name their synagogues. What is even more amazing is that today there are tens of millions of Jewish people who trace their ancestry back to Jacob. Christians trace their lineage to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Most of us know the spiritual "Jacob's Ladder." The image portrayed is of people slogging up upward, joylessly like it is a tremendous burden. That does not seem to fit the Biblical image of a ladder from earth to heaven with angels going and coming. What is this dream of Jacob's?

Jacob's ladder tells a different story. In Jacob's dream God is busy and active in the lives of people. God is even active in the life of a crook holding back the curtain and giving Jacob a glimpse of how things really are. If we could just be aware as Jacob was we could realize that God is in this place. How awesome it is to come to this realization.

I do not think anyone here this morning is a fugitive on the run rather we are hard working people who care about others and say our prayers. We just don't dream dreams or see visions. Maybe that is too bad. You see if truth be told we are bored with our faith. We could deal with a little vision to spice things up a bit. Maybe I am mistaken, perhaps I am preaching to the choir and those who are bored just stay home on Sundays.

But look what Jacob does. He gets up early, takes the stone he slept on and pours oil on it, gives it the name Bethel and makes a promise to God. I imagine if any one of us had a dream like that we would be making promises of tithes, of wrestling, of relationship - just like church. It might not be easy but it is the only place to meet God.

But there is more to this story. Awestruck Jacob creates this place called Bethel and then he adds, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house; and all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." Did you just hear what Jacob said? If.....There is no "if" on God's part. This is Jacob the thief, the swindler, the fugitive saying to God "If you will keep your promises then...." There are no ifs in God's promise to bind himself to Jacob's offspring forever. Jacob says to God, "Sounds like a pretty good deal, tell you what, you do your part and I might do mine." God is not a God of maybe.

In our baptismal covenant God promises to love us forever. In the celebration of the Eucharist God promises to be with us forever. In Jesus Christ God promises us a place in the heavenly kingdom forever. We in return are asked very little.

God says to us, "I love you." What God wants to hear back is "I love you too" and mean it. That seems so easy. I think many of us are like the young couple who had been dating for quite some time. Finally one night he says to her, "I love you." She responds, "Really, that is not quite what I had in mind." God is patient. The message is repeated over and over during the course of our lives. Maybe we can learn to say, "I love you too."

