

“We Are Climbing”
Genesis 28: 10 – 22
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Bruce Springsteen in his album, Seeger Sessions, a CD he recorded a few years ago, contains songs that Pete Seeger wrote and/or sang. One of my favorites is a joyful upbeat version of Jacob’s ladder.

“We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder – brothers/sisters all”

“Every round goes higher and higher – brothers/sisters all”

“Every rung just makes us stronger – brothers/sisters all”

We are climbing Jacob's ladder and every round gets higher and higher as we get closer to understanding God’s call to us as His church. Every rung on the ladder makes us stronger, and in our journey together my prayer is that we realize that indeed we are “brothers and sisters all.”

Jacob’s ladder is not a bridge in the traditional sense, but a ladder that serves the function of a bridge...connecting earth and heaven closely enough that the angels of God can come and go as they wish.

When you look at it, a dream or vision like Jacob’s is amazing enough, but I think if we only examine the dream, we will have missed a key point in the story. The most amazing thing to me in this story is NOT that Jacob had a DREAM, but that it was JACOB who had the dream.

For those of you not too familiar with the Old Testament's family tree, Jacob is the son of Isaac, who is the son of Abraham. Abraham was a man of faith whom God singled out for a mission to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Jacob is one of Abraham's grandsons and he is not a grandson that a grandfather would go around bragging about.

To put it bluntly, Jacob is a rat...a rascal, a scoundrel.

The whole reason we find Jacob out in the middle of nowhere with a rock for a pillow is because he is running from his twin brother Esau, who is trying to kill him.

Why is that?

Because Jacob has stolen everything of value from Esau his brother; he stole Esau's inheritance; he stole their father's blessing, in essence, he stole his brother's future, by taking advantage of their blind father's ill-health. Now Esau wants to kill his brother and Rebecca their mother advised Jacob to take a long trip to see family in a far country.

Now, if you were Esau, this dream that Jacob had might just be enough to get you to give up your religion. Here you've always done everything right, you're at home supporting your father and mother, yet you get no dream, no vision, no promise, no blessing.

Your loser of a brother, however, after cheating and lying his way into getting all that belongs to you, the minute he lies down for a nap, the heavens open, and God shows up with even more blessings and promises.

What I want to say this morning is that this is exactly what the Gospel is all about. This is exactly the criticism that Jesus received from the religious leaders of his day, that is, he was always hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Instead of blessing the righteous, he was cavorting with sinners. He was making them promises and bringing them gifts of healing and forgiveness, blessing them with the honor of his presence.

"What gives?" the Pharisees said to Jesus. "You are a rabbi...a religious leader, and yet you are ignoring the faithful, and giving all your attention to these outsiders." Jesus replies:

"I didn't come for the righteous ones; the good folks don't need a savior. I came to find the lost ones and bring them home." ¹

¹ See Mark 2: 13-17

This is a pattern with God, which starts very early. God does not appear to Jacob because of Jacob's righteousness, but precisely the opposite. God comes to Jacob in order to open up new possibilities for a no-good brother who is on the wrong road.

There's a story I heard on a talk show some time ago. The person being interviewed was an African woman; she was the queen of her tribe. She was on a goodwill mission to the US and visiting inner-city schools in New York City. As she spoke, she told about going into a classroom where a boy was in "time-out" in the corner of the room.

She asked the teacher about him and was told that this boy was a problem. He was always in trouble.

He was mean, he didn't seem to care whether he learned anything or not, and had a terrible influence on his other classmates. He was always in "time-out." The teacher had completely given up on him.

The queen went over to see him. When she sat down beside him, she took out a small scroll she had brought and gave it to the boy.

"Congratulations," she said with a smile. "This scroll makes you an honorary prince of my people."

She then went on to tell the boy about her tribe and what it meant to be a prince. She told how princes were men of honor, how they watched out for others in the tribe, and always did what was good in the eyes of the people. The boy took the scroll and she left.

The important part of the story is that the boy's teacher said that she never had another behavioral problem with him. He became what the queen named him, a prince of the tribe, and he acted accordingly.

What that African queen did for that New York City boy is exactly what God does for Jacob at Bethel. Jacob is in the corner for misbehaving, and then, all of a sudden, 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; 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." ²

Jacob wasn't even a blessing to his own family, let alone all the families of the earth. But God named a new reality for him.

And Jacob responds; his life is not completely changed at this point, it will take some time, and at one point he will actually wrestle with God.

But it is here that the changes begin, and to mark that beginning, Jacob makes a vow.

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in the 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 up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you." ³

I'll say it again, this is the Gospel. God is seeking the lost. God is longing for those who are running in the other direction. God is not a divine law enforcement agent who is looking for sinners so that he can throw them into prison.

God is looking for those whose lives are self-destructing in order to give them tools for bridge building, in order to show them a better way and to give them whatever they need to construct a better life.

And that is exactly what Jesus is about. Jesus is the concrete expression of God's love. Jesus is God's bridge.

The bridge:

² Genesis 28: 13-14

³ Genesis 28: 20-22

That made it possible for God to actually stand beside Zacchaeus, the tax collector and say: “I’m coming to your house for dinner.”⁴

That made it possible for God to say to a woman caught in adultery: “I don’t condemn you, go and live a better life.”⁵

That made it possible for Jesus to say to a repentant thief on the cross: “Today you will share Paradise with me.”⁶

And they responded as Jacob responded, with wonder, with awe, and with the promise of change.

Because that is what God has been about from the beginning;

Because that plan was made concrete in Jesus, and

Because we, as the Church, are to be the Body of Christ, we are to be Jesus in and for the world;

That is what we are to be about as well.

Esau is righteous, is fine, and is doing well.

It is the Jacob’s of the world that we need to seek out with the saving message of the gospel, the good news of God’s love and promise in Jesus Christ.

This is where we sit on this Sunday with the vision of Jacob’s ladder in our head. We are called to climb higher and higher, realizing that as we climb, every rung makes us stronger, and that we are all in this together – brothers, sisters, all.

This day is the end of a new beginning, the day when we elect our Pastor Nominating Committee;

A day when share the sacrament of Holy Communion together;

⁴ See Luke 19: 1-8

⁵ See John 4: 1-42

⁶ Luke 23: 39-43

The day we consider how to respond to the fact that God has come to us and offered us all the blessings of heaven.

The day that we remember that Jesus is the concrete expression of God's love for us.

How are we to respond with our time, talents, and our treasure?

What is the concrete expression of our love for God?

I am reminded of the “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” that Bishop Robert Schnase writes about in his book of the same name.

Those five practices are:

1. Radical Hospitality
2. Passionate Worship
3. Intentional Faith Development
4. Risk-taking Mission and Service
5. Extravagant Generosity

Bishop Schnase’s premise is that the strength and presence of these practices show forth a congregation’s health, vitality, and fruitfulness.

By repeating and improving these practices, churches fulfill their mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

As a congregation practices **Radical Hospitality** it offers the gracious invitation and welcome of Jesus Christ to visitors, new members, and members alike so that everyone experiences a sense of belonging.

Coming together for worship, we are called to practice **Passionate Worship**, worship of God that shapes souls and changes minds by creating a desire to grow closer to Christ.

A fruitful congregation is involved in education and small group ministry that practices **Intentional Faith Development** where God’s spirit nurtures people so that they mature in faith through study and learning opportunities.

With increased spiritual maturity, the community of faith discerns God's call to help others through **Risk-taking Mission and Service**.

In addition to all of the above, the fruitful congregation practices **Extravagant Generosity**, a generosity that inspires people to give of themselves, "above and beyond" through their "time, talent, and treasure" so that others can receive the grace, love, and forgiveness that they have known. ⁷

As we continue our time together and you move forward anticipating a time of new beginnings, I charge you to allow these practices to shape not only your own personal reflections, but also to shape the concrete expression of your mission and ministry as God's community of faith as we all seek to Celebrate God, Grow in Christ, and Extend the Spirit.

Do all of this in order to fulfill the greatest task ever entrusted to humankind, the task of sharing the good news that we have seen and that we know in Jesus Christ.

Let us all be about climbing Jacob's ladder higher and higher, and as we dream the dream of God's love, a love that comes down to us in waves, angel after angel, gift after gift, without us having deserved the first bit of it. Then, perhaps upon waking, we too will say with Jacob...

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." ⁸

Amen.

⁷ Robert Schnase, "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations"

⁸ Genesis 28: 16-17

1. We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
Soldiers of the cross.

2. Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
Soldiers of the cross.

3. Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Soldiers of the cross.

4. If you love Him, why not serve Him?
If you love Him, why not serve Him?
If you love Him, why not serve Him?
Soldiers of the cross.