

The Ladder in God's House

Genesis 28:10-22

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Sunday, July 20, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Before the sermon, I want to call your attention to three things. This past week I sent to the congregation a letter about our General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and today I ask for your prayers, to keep praying for our presbytery...and our General Assembly... our denomination, for we will have many issues of concern to work through in the coming months. Secondly, I want to thank you for the generosity that you have poured out to this ministry of Jesus Christ. This past June, you have been extra generous beyond what we experienced last year at this same time. And then finally, you will notice every week there are “Brunch Bunch Questions” that help you to reflect upon the text of the day and to enter into conversations about things that may be going on in your life, in relationship to what God might be saying in that text.

Let us pray together. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, as you are the Mediator between us and heaven, we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit to speak to us as the Word of God, from your holy Scripture, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I know it may be challenging when you look at me, but I do have an elder brother who is a state champion gymnast in California. It happens that he also liked to climb into high places. He built tree houses at heights that no one else in the family would dare go; and he made ladders that we could not climb up (only he could ascend.) In my younger years, I wished I had his ability, but then I discovered I was afraid of heights and decided I was just fine. Climbing is a human pursuit. And God has given us the wonderful image of a ladder. It is often referred to as “Jacob’s Ladder,” but I believe that this ladder is more appropriately, “The Ladder in God’s House.”

In their debut album of 1978, the Canadian progressive rock band, “Saga,” released this song, “Climbing the Ladder”

“Wiping his brow He managed to tear himself away. The past few nights had left him rather tired.

Returned his thoughts To a need he felt overpowering. He felt success was now within his grasp.

Climbing the ladder Three rungs forward, two rungs back Climbing the ladder Trying to stay on just the right track

Keeps up the pace; Tells himself that it's all worthwhile; Hard work is its own reward one day.

Could he be wrong? Are all his dreams merely fantasies? And would it all fall back on him some day?

Climbing the ladder Three rungs forward, two rungs back Climbing the ladder Trying to stay on just the right track

Now he sits back, Amid all the things he worked so hard for, And wonders, was the energy well spent?

Whatever the price, He is where he wants to be. The end has justified the means and all.”

Jacob was born, climbing a ladder. He was competitive, even combative, with his brother, Esau, even in his mother’s womb. He was born grasping for all he could get, grabbing hold of Esau’s heel, trying to beat him out of the womb. He tried with all of his wits to steal the family fortune. Even his parents recognized his genetic tendency and named him, Jacob, or “sup-planter”— one who works to takes the place of someone else. He was bound and determined to get everything he could on his own terms, in his own

strength, by his own determination. He would, in fact, have been a great American. We live in a world, ironically, that has invoked “Jacob’s Ladder” – that image in all sorts of ways, rather than the way that it was originally intended in this text. Our passion for climbing ladders gives host to a huge hunk of human hubris: climbing the Olympic ladder... climbing the academic ladder...the corporate ladder...even books on specialized climbing— women climbing the vocational ladder and reaching a glass ceiling.

There are dozens of self-help books about climbing ladders and one grabbed my attention: “Climbing the Ladder in Stilettos: A self-help book with 10 Strategies for Women to Step Up to Success and Satisfaction at Work” I wonder what kind of satisfaction one can have in stilettos? I found it fascinating that the author, Lynette Lewis, refers to the best-selling book by pastor Rick Warren, “The Purpose-Driven Life.” She uses his book as a foundation for hers. I wonder how Rick Warren would feel about that? She also quotes a well-known Christian writer who lives here in Washington, DC, Os Guinness, with his book, “The Call.” And in that book, he says, “Deep in our hearts we all want to find and fulfill a purpose that is bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights that we know we could never reach on our own.” I wonder how Os feels about being quoted in support of a book using the power image of stiletto high heels?

But, let’s not miss the prime point here. Heels, or no heels, these are heights that we cannot reach on our own. Lewis’ Table of Contents, amazingly, has some intriguing chapter titles that could actually double for Jacob’s life. For instance, one chapter is: “No one appreciates me around here.” Another says, “Is this all I’m working for? There must be something more.” Another says, “I’m unrecognized, underappreciated and underpaid.” And finally, one says, “How do I get from the ‘Great Idea’ to a ‘Dream Come True?’” In my search for understanding the American passion to climb, I also found some detailed instructions on how to climb an ordinary ladder. And the one key instruction at the very end said this: **FACE THE LADDER AND DON’T TURN AWAY, AT ALL COSTS.** Fortunately for us, Jacob did not look at the ladder; he turned away from the ladder and he looked at the event going on beside him.

There seems to be a bottom line in all of these writings about ‘climbing the ladder.’ Climbing is something we human beings love to do— not just for a challenge, but even to reach God. We think we can make it happen on our own. If we do the work... if we invest the time... we can reach God. We may even become gods. Because, in the beginnings of history, making and climbing ladders has been at the core of human quest; and to become like God was clearly demonstrated in Genesis, chapter 11. We read, on the great Mesopotamian plain of Shinar, how the human community talked to each other about what they could do: “Come, let us make bricks and mortar... Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heaven; and let us make a name for ourselves...” We desire to make the ultimate ladder. We can anchor it clearly on earth, in the ground. We secure it at the top. We grab hold of it and we even compete to climb up— even if we have to push others out of the way. Success is often all about us. “Reaching the top” is how we define our ability, courage, and strength—even our humanity... and could it be, potentially, our divinity? We think reaching God is all about what we do. Our self-determination even enters into our spiritual songs: “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder. We are climbing higher, higher...” As Mike Denham and I looked at this offertory anthem this past week, and compared it to the biblical text, we became more and more concerned about the disconnection between these words and what the text says. Jacob does not do anything with the ladder. Jacob does not create the ladder. Jacob does not plant the ladder. He does not direct the ladder. Jacob does not climb the ladder. You may notice that Mike, in fact, has changed some of the words for this anthem today.

The dream of the ladder... the reality of what the ladder symbolizes... the existence of the steps between earth and heaven... the planting of the ladder on earth... the securing of the ladder in heaven... the angelic messengers going up and down— these are all acts of God, not us. The ladder is a gift of God. The activity of the ladder is the grace of God. Jacob does nothing. Well, he does do something— he sleeps. He is in a desolate place. He’s fleeing for his life. He has no secure future; no ability to make a future. He has made a mess out of his life. His brother hates him. He’s in trouble. He sleeps on rocks. He has no tent. He’s vulnerable to the elements and good prey for wild animals. There is no way of success for him. He has run out of his own options. He has spent all of his self-help currency. In his desire to ascend to human glory, he has descended even to a dark night. His self-determination has been terminated. His futures are down. He has hit rock bottom. He is out there in the middle of nowhere— in the desert; nothing for him to climb. All of his conniving has cost him status, family, and wealth. And he is as good as dead if Esau catches up

to him.

But...God meets Jacob at the very core of his being— at the center of his dream. His dream in life is to ascend, even at the expense of a brother and father. God does give him a dream, but God's dream is not on Jacob's terms. God gives the dream. God gives the ladder. God gives the angels. God gives the access to heaven. God makes it all happen. Jacob can do nothing. Jacob cannot climb the ladder. He cannot go higher, higher. Jacob can only run away and sleep. He has been grounded; only God can lift him up.

In preparing for this sermon, I reviewed several paintings by great artists about this particular text, often referred to as "Jacob's Dream," or "Jacob's Ladder." It was amazing to me what I did not see in most of the paintings. I did see: Jacob, lying on the ground asleep... the ladder going up to heaven...the angels— some climbing, some flying up and down... darkness on the earth, and streaming light in heaven. But what I failed to see in these paintings was any hint of the main point of the text. God was not anywhere to be found. It was as if the LORD was never there. Maybe it's because painters have a hard time drawing pictures of God. Maybe it was just too much to comprehend; but God is profoundly absent in the paintings. Doesn't the text clearly proclaim: "...the LORD stood beside him and said..." And when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he immediately belted out: "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" While the ladder is a striking metaphor... the angels are important messengers... the most important happening in this moment, in this place, is the presence of the LORD. As Walter Brueggemann says, "The narrative moves to the real agenda: the speech of the LORD. It is not an angel who speaks, or even God. It is the LORD who speaks." Jacob does not awaken suddenly from a dramatic dream to talk about ladders or angels. He has no desire to complain about the hard pillows or the fitful sleep. Rising in the morning he has only one thing to exclaim: "Isn't the LORD in this place?" He has not just heard from God. He has heard from his LORD, the LORD of all people; and his life will never be the same. He is full of fear to be, not so much in this awesome, terrible place because it's desolate, but because he realizes that he is in God's hands and he is not in control. God is. He is in God's personal presence. He is in the LORD's hands; and he has not done anything to make it happen. All of his ambition to climb the ladder of life has fallen to failure. But God has graciously given him the gift of the real ladder.

I think this ladder tells us some important things about prayer and about how God communicates— some assumptions about the very primeval nature of how prayer works, because prayer is God's gift. We don't make it happen; we can participate in it. Prayer is a two-way communication: prayer comes down and prayer goes up. God speaks first and we listen; then we speak and God listens. While we success-driven and sinful mortals cannot make God perform for us, we can come to realize that God gives us the gift of life... the gift of salvation... the gift of prayer. God brings us to the brink of self-extinguishment where we barely exist; and then we discover the ultimate truth that, all of the time that we are going through the pain, God is present and has been there the whole time. "The LORD is in this place!" This is the heart of prayer at any place, at any time. The communication of prayer is not about us; it's all about God. The ladder is not about us; the ladder calls our attention to its creator, our LORD. The angels are not there at our command; the angels are there at God's command. The first act of prayer is not our request, but it is God's declaration and promise. Prayer is created by God, first for us to hear what God has to say, and then for us to respond. The ladder is the LORD's. It is not Jacob's ladder; and we cannot climb it. We can recognize it! We can enjoy it! We can name it! But we cannot climb it.

Jacob, as well, discovered success, like prayer, is a gift of God. You see, we're not left out there in the wilderness, in the middle of nowhere, alone, to perish. God is with us. Even though we often give-in to our own devices and our own determinations, our own arrogance and alienation... God is still right there with us. God, in fact, will allow us to spend all of our energy... all of our imagination and our will. And then, after we have burned out on our own inability to get it done, God will speak then. There is no question here who owns the ladder; it's not Jacob. "Beth-el" [house of God] is not a physical building, a beautiful church like this. "Beth-el" is not a beautifully-designed campus and sanctuary. "Beth-el" is simply wherever God is present anywhere on earth.

And, as we know from the New Testament and the Old Testament, God is with us all of the time in Emmanuel— God with us. For it is Emmanuel— Jesus, the Christ—who has come down to be with us. It is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who has descended from the ladder, to come alongside of us. And, as John Calvin points out: Jesus, in fact, is the ladder. Jesus is the Mediator who has descended to earth.

And as Calvin tells us, regarding the ladder: “It is Christ alone... who connects heaven and earth. He is the only Mediator who reaches from heaven down to earth. He is the medium through which the fullness of celestial blessing flows down to us, and through which we, in turn, can ascend to God.” In fact, it is in the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, grounded securely on the earth that points to heaven; and that ladder belongs to God. The Ladder is the LORD’s. The Lord has come down to be with us. The Lord stands with us and speaks with us. “Surely the LORD is in this place!”

Sometimes, in our preoccupation with our own pain, our self-pity, or our personal grief, we forget, or do not know, that the Lord is present. We think that we are in the place that Brueggemann says, has “no name”... a place that is “between” important spaces... “where nothing is expected”—it’s a ‘non-place.’ But then, somehow, this “no place” is transformed by God, in the middle of our desolation and our self-determination that is burned out—and God is there. You may feel like a non-person; exiled today, and threatened. But God’s presence and word here and now, make you the critical person that God wants to speak to. And it’s all because God has given the gift of the Ladder. It is the LORD’s Ladder. And there’s a question that God asks: Are you ready to declare that, in fact, your life belongs to God? Your life is in the hands of the LORD who gives Jesus Christ to die for you? And are you ready to commit who you are and what God gives to you to the service of your LORD? Are you ready to call this moment in your life, “Beth-el,” “House of God”? Are you ready to make the vow like Jacob made it: “If God will be with me and keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear... then the LORD shall be my LORD.”

Oh, by the way, remember that last line of the text— Jacob put his money where his mouth was: “And all you give me, LORD, I will give you back 10%.” Living at the bottom of the ladder, at the foot of the cross, moves us to become humble, disciplined, and generous people. There are no stingy and tight people who have met God out in the wilderness, face-to-face.

If you’re climbing the ladder of ambition and success today, remember Jacob. You are not Lord over your own life; and I hope you don’t have to lose everything to find out. Stop working so hard to reach God; because God has already come down to you in Jesus. There is absolutely nothing you can do to get to God; you can’t pray yourself into God’s presence—because you already are in God’s presence. There is a Ladder here in God’s house and it belongs to the Owner of the house. The best Ladder has always been available to you and to me. And you don’t even have to do the climbing, because the God of all creation has already climbed down to you and has spoken to you, personally, in Jesus. So the question he asks is: “Are you ready to pray?”

Let us pray. And by your invitation, Lord Jesus Christ, by your mediation between heaven and earth, we now offer our prayer. That you will take your Word and you will transform us in the power of your presence, in the community of your Holy Spirit, to become people who are transformed to be more like God— the God we worship... the God who has given us all gifts. In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.