

Ladder of Connection
Genesis 28:10-19a
July 26, 2020
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This is a familiar story, but like so many of the biblical classics, it continues to surprise us and speak to us in new ways. What leapt out at me the last week or so as I thought about Jacob's ladder was the image of the ladder as a means of connection. In the past, maybe unconsciously, I think I normally visualized the ladder as a means of ascent – it was the way we could get TO GOD. But now I also see it as the means by which God and God's messengers can come TO US. It plainly says that the angels of God were ascending *and descending* on it. I'm developing a picture of Jacob's ladder as a sort of divine superhighway, with lots of coming and going.

The ladder is a common metaphor in our society, but we do tend to think in terms of going UP the ladder, not DOWN it. We speak of "climbing the ladder" of career advancement, or acquiring material possessions, or making our way to positions of ever greater power. None of those things are necessarily bad, until we lose sight of who we are and begin to shed our values and our integrity so that we can climb higher. I wonder if climbing the ladder to the presence of God actually means that we have to be willing to climb down the ladder that our culture has constructed for us. So much of what God wants for us is a reversal of what society tells us is important. That may be a conversation for a different day. At this particular moment in time, it feels more important to me that we remember that God and God's messengers *come to us*. God's words to Jacob that he should "know that I am with you wherever you go," and God's promise to "bring you back to this land, and I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you" are important messages for us to hear right now, for they communicate a truth that can sustain us.

I feel like we as a country and as a people are in the middle of a terribly anxious time. Lots of us are on edge and coping all the time with the feeling of being uneasy and unsettled. There are plenty of good reasons for that. We are living through a pandemic the likes of which very few living people have ever experienced. The closest corollary is the flu epidemic of 1918...even if there is a small number of people alive now who were alive then, they would have been very young children. When we ceased worshipping in person back in mid-March, I thought the shut down would last, at the most, a few weeks. I simply didn't understand the persistence of this virus or the things that we would learn about it. As the number of cases continues to rise (we hit 4 million in the United States this past week), and we see the devastating effects of COVID-19 even on people who survive it, and we don't have any clarity on when things can go back to "normal," I have found my own anxiety level creeping up. Add to

the pandemic the uptick in racial tensions and, in some locations, violence related to those tensions. Although I do not celebrate or condone violence, I actually feel some hope around these issues at this time. People are starting to have more honest conversations about race and how racism affects all of us. Significant numbers of white people are starting (or continuing) to educate ourselves about the insidious nature of racist thought and how even well intentioned, thoughtful people can and do participate in it. On those lines, I highly recommend that you look at the resources that St. Matthew's Mission Commission has posted on our website about racism in the United States. There is everything there from YouTube videos, articles, podcasts, book lists, and recommended movies and documentaries. Whether you have 10 minutes or two hours, there is something there from which we can all learn. The fact that so many people WANT to

learn about this right now makes me think that things can get better. As Maya Angelou once said, “When you know better, you do better.”

So, even

though the outlook for the future is not without hope, right now things feel chaotic and painful.

Add to that the cyclical stress of a looming presidential election, people trying to figure out how to deal with the reality that our kids won't be going back to in person school anytime soon, dire economic challenges for some of us, and the pervasive uncertainty of just about every part of life that we are used to. Is it safe to go to the grocery store? Will our extended family be able to get together for the holidays? When will we be able to do normal things like meet a friend for coffee or go to a movie – things that are not essential to physical survival but nevertheless add pleasure and joy to life?

I definitely feel like my own

emotional health has been impacted by all of this, and maybe yours has too. I cry more easily

and am quicker to get impatient with my kids and our poor dog. I can blow small

inconveniences or disagreements that would ordinarily roll right past me way out of proportion,

giving them power to ruin my day when they really aren't a huge deal. My check-ins with

colleagues and friends reveal similar angst. I continue to believe that we will get through this,

and that we will find ways to stay in relationship as sisters and brothers in Christ...but that

doesn't mean it is easy. That doesn't mean that this is not a terribly stressful experience.

One of the

things that can help us right now is to be intentional about nourishing our connection to God. I

firmly believe that God is with us right now and will remain with us through whatever comes –

but sometimes we have to work a little harder to experience that presence, to be aware of it.

Other things can crowd it out. However, there are some parts of this narrative that can illuminate

our own quest to be connected with God.

It's remarkable to me that

God can and does show up in unexpected places. In this case, Jacob is between places – not home, but not to his destination either. The geographical location would be totally unremarkable except that it turns out to be the place where Jacob meets God. Could God also come to us in this liminal, in between time, this period that we are living in, between what was and what will be?

Jacob does not begin this

story in a state of spiritual awareness – he is running for his life. Before his dream of the ladder, Jacob has fled his home. He left because he stole his brother Esau's birthright and Esau is so angry he is plotting to kill Jacob. Jacob is going to the home of his mother's brother, named Laban, hopefully to find a wife and lie low for awhile until Esau's fury subsides. Old Testament guru Walter Bruggemann's commentary on Genesis offers some enlightening insights for this story.

For Bruggemann, it is

significant that the encounter with God happens in a dream. He describes the dream state as a time when our unconscious mind can present us with different scenarios from the life we are living, different paths that we might yet take. Here is how Brueggemann describes what is going on: "The transformation takes place during sleep, when Jacob has lost control of his destiny. In the process, this 'non-person' (exiled and threatened) is transformed by the coming of God into a person crucial for the fulfillment of God's promise...The meeting happens in a dream. The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness, and, we may imagine, unresolved guilt. Those were the parameters of his existence. The dream permits the entry of an alternative into his life. The dream is not a morbid review of a shameful past. It is rather the presentation of an alternative future with God." (*Interpretation Commentary*, pgs 242-43)

What are your dreams? And what are our dreams, collectively, as a church? I believe God has always been with us, but also am open to the possibility that God is using this time, right now, to help us dream of a better world. In such a world, people can get the care they need when they fall sick. Black men can walk down the street without fear of being arrested, brutalized, or killed. The legal system works for everyone, instead of being a tool of oppression for some and an expression of privilege for others. People who desire to learn can have an education. “Impossible,” you might say. “It would never work.” But we love and serve a God of possibility. God gives us those dreams AND the desire to make them true.

And the most amazing part of all of this is that we are not left to pursue those dreams alone. God is with us. God and God’s messengers are forever climbing down and up and down again that ladder of connection, coming to us to empower and energize. Brueggemann points out that God’s promise to Jacob is threefold: God will *accompany us, will keep (protect) us, and take us home*. Remember that Jacob was on the run – the promise that one day he would go home implied not just shelter but also reconciliation of the relationship with his brother.

About the ladder of connection (which he says was probably more like a ramp), Brueggemann writes this: “The intent of the ramp/ladder is that heaven has come to be on earth. This promise represents a central thrust of biblical faith. It refutes all the despairing judgements of human existence. A fresh understanding of God is required if we are to be delivered from the hopeless analyses of human possibility. God commits to the empty-handed fugitive. The fugitive is not abandoned, for God will accompany him.” (*Interpretation Commentary, pgs 244-45.*) So committed is God to that promise that it was eventually embodied in the name of Jesus of Nazareth – Immanuel, God with us.

We are living through tough times right now, characterized by uncertainty. It makes sense that we would have times when we feel anxious and afraid. But let's try to remember that God is with us even in those moments – especially in those moments. As we dream of a fairer, more just world, we rely on the ladder of connection to give us what we need. Certainly we make an effort to make our way to God, but we also trust that God and the angels are forever and always *coming to us*. They are going to meet us more than halfway. They will guide us and show us the way to make our dreams come true. Thanks be to God. Amen.