

“Reaching God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 28: 10-19a

When was the last time you used a ladder? Perhaps it was a step ladder in your house, when you needed a little extra height to reach something on a top shelf. Perhaps it was outside your house, when you needed to clean off leaves and debris from your gutters. Perhaps it was to change a light bulb that had burned out.

Ladders are very helpful at particular times. They allow us to reach a height that is greater than ourselves. I have four different ladders at my house, and each of them are useful for accomplishing certain maintenance tasks inside and outside my home. If I didn't have those tools, I wouldn't be able to keep my house in good working order, or I would have to pay someone to do that for me. And that's a good choice for many people – as some of us don't feel comfortable using a ladder due to the heights involved!

A ladder is useful to both reach something we cannot attain, and to take us further away from where we are. Here at the church, we use the large A-frame ladder to reach light fixtures and other items up high here in the sanctuary, and it's such a large tool that it requires at least three people to maneuver it. But sometimes we use ladders to get away from things. The example that comes to my mind is a treehouse for children. Those ladders allow us to climb up to a place that is isolated and above everything else. In that situation, a ladder is our escape and then our means to re-enter the real world when we feel we are ready.

Most of us have an image in our minds when we hear the phrase, “climbing Jacob's ladder.” We think of a tall, slender ladder going up into the sky; I actually think of Jack's beanstalk reaching up into the sky. And when we read this passage from Genesis, our attention may be caught by particular things: the ladder reaching up to heaven; angels ascending and descending. But we might not always remember how Jacob got to this point, and the series of events which brought him to this place he would name Bethel. After what Jacob had done and been through, climbing a ladder to escape his troubles probably sounded very appealing indeed.

Last week, we discussed how Jacob tricked his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright, bartering it for a meal when Esau came in famished from the fields. Since then, Jacob has tricked his brother out of his father's blessing, with a lot of help from his mother, Rebekah. Isaac called on Esau to go into the fields to hunt game, then to bring it back for his meal, and in return he would offer his oldest son the blessing he deserved. Instead, Rebekah sends Jacob in disguise to trick Isaac, and believing he was Esau, Isaac blesses Jacob: “Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” (27:29).

With that blessing, Jacob has stolen the one thing Esau yearned to have. And in so doing, Esau hates his younger brother and says, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob” (27:41). Jacob is not out for a leisurely trip when he sleeps at Bethel and has his dream. He is literally fleeing for his life, en route to Rebekah’s brother, Laban, when he stops for the night in the desert.

One commentator has noted: Up to this point in the story of Isaac’s two sons, the young men are presented by the text in quite secular terms. Unlike Abraham, who frequently prayed and worshiped, and even Isaac – a shadowy figure – who at least knew how and when to invoke the name of the Deity (Genesis 27:27-28), Esau and Jacob have betrayed little sense of the role of God in their or their family’s lives. Jacob’s motivation, sly fox that he is, is basically greed, while poor, fumbling Esau is portrayed as a foil for this sibling’s schemes. But at Bethel Jacob encounters the living God and life begins to assume a different perspective (Texts for Preaching, Year A, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©1995: 407).

Up until this point in Jacob’s life, he hadn’t seen or experienced God’s presence in a real, tangible way. It has been through his family that God has acted – his mother, father, even his brother – but Jacob hasn’t acknowledged that God was present in those activities. Now, when he lays down to sleep in the desert, he is spoken directly to by Yahweh.

His dream begins with a vision of a ladder or stairway “set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (28:12). Jacob himself is not climbing that ladder – only the messengers of God who are coming and going between earth and heaven. In fact, it is not necessary for Jacob to climb the ladder to reach God; in the translation we read from today, “And the Lord stood beside him . . .” (28:13). It didn’t take a ladder for the human to reach God; it only served as a reminder that God continually comes to meet us, whenever we recognize his presence in our midst.

What is most important is the message God has to share with Jacob. It is a message which has been shared with his ancestors in the past, and is spoken to him anew. “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” (28:13-14). And then, perhaps most personally, God assures Jacob – the one who has tricked, bartered, and connived his way to the top – that he will never leave him: “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” (28:15).

Jacob has been running away, scared of his brother Esau and the retribution he is seeking. He is alone in the desert, and he likely felt alienated from the world. In the midst of this self-inflicted solitary confinement, he is brought a message of comfort: “I am with you, and will stay with you forever.” In a real way, this becomes a turning point in Jacob’s life, and it “becomes a moment of renewal in the history of God’s dealings with all humankind. For his part, Jacob never renounces his crafty

ways . . . But his life is never again lived apart from God's claims, and he will later demand of his family the same devotion to the God of Bethel that he learned at that sacred spot (35:1-4). All of which is a cogent reminder of the power of the Spirit of God to reshape and reorient human life. Jacob was not an entirely new person, but neither was he the same old Jacob" (ibid).

That change in Jacob is illustrated in his actions upon awakening from his dream. "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, and this is the gate of heaven" (28:17). And with those statements, Jacob built a physical reminder of his encounter with the living God, using the stone upon which he laid his head as the altar, and he named it Bethel, which in Hebrew means, "House of God." For Jacob, it was a life-changing experience, a moment in time when he knew that he was not alone, and he would forever be cared for by the God of his father, grandfather, and all his family before him.

Sometimes it feels as if we need some miracle or spectacular event to reach God. We feel alone, confused, anxious, exasperated, and we have no idea how to experience God's presence when we need it most. We believe we have to build gigantic structures to reach the heavens. We think it takes just the right words or phrases for God to finally hear us. We believe it must be this new way of worshiping, or studying the Bible, or being the church – and that is when we will know God.

The funny thing is it doesn't matter what we do – God will be there, standing beside us, just as he stood beside Jacob. It doesn't take a tall ladder, or a soaring cathedral, or the latest scheme in church growth to reach the Lord our God. All it takes is an open mind, an open heart, and an open soul. And when we open ourselves wholly and completely, we will hear the same promise Yahweh uttered to Jacob: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, for I will not leave you."

The next time you desire to find a way to reach God, consider that God has already come down the ladder and is standing beside you. And know that God is with you and will keep you wherever you go, never leaving your side.

Thanks be to the living, loving God. Amen.