

Sermon: “Jacob’s Ladder” Genesis 28: 10-19 – 23 July 2017

Jacob was on the run. He had deceived his father, Isaac. He had stolen a blessing from his older brother, Esau. Jacob fled for his life into the wilderness. He constantly looked over his shoulder, fearing that Esau was hot on his heels. At the end of a long, hot day, he lay down and slept. Then he dreamed. He saw a ladder drop from heaven. Angels were climbing up and coming down the ladder. Suddenly he heard a voice: ***“I am the God of Abraham and Isaac. I will give you and your descendants all of this land. I will protect you and them forever. I will bring you back home. You can count on me. I keep my promises.”*** Jacob woke up. Stunned by what he had seen and heard, he cried out: ***“Surely the Lord is in this place. Awesome! I name this place Bethel, for this is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven!”*** Jacob didn’t have time to ponder the meaning of what he had seen and heard. Immediately he got back on the road. Ahead of him were years of regret, losses, and grief. And he would be manipulated by an uncle who was at least as devious and deceitful as Jacob had been. But God kept his promise. It took over twenty years, but God brought Jacob home to the land he had promised him.

Now, this fascinating story has an odd ending, doesn’t it? We would have expected Jacob to get what he deserved. Jacob was, and he knew he was, a liar and a cheat. He had no claim on God’s justice or protection. He was entitled to nothing better than swift tribal justice at the hands of his brother Esau. The last thing he expected – the last thing he probably wanted – was a visit from a just God. Yet a ladder dropped, and in a mysterious way God was present to him and for him. And God uttered not a word of judgment against Jacob for what he had done. Instead he gave him a promise, a blessing, and divine protection. This happened not at a traditional place of worship, there was no altar there, no cathedral in the desert with soft organ music playing. It was in the middle of nowhere, a place that didn’t even have a name. Really, God had no business being there. But as Barbara Taylor Brown – one of my favorite writers – has suggested: ***“What if God can drop a ladder anywhere?”***

In 1955 Martin Luther King was organizing a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. This was the first major test of his leadership. One night, at the end of a long exhausting day, he came home. Just then the telephone rang. A man’s voice said: ***“Get out of Montgomery now, or you are going to die.”*** Later Dr. King wrote that he was ready to give up, he was afraid. He walked into his kitchen, sat down at a table, and prayed. Then he heard a quiet inner voice: ***“Stand up for justice, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.”*** Then, said Dr. King: ***“My fear began to go, my uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything!”*** Now, we don’t know whether Dr. King was reminded of Jacob’s unlikely encounter with God at the foot of a ladder. But might not a ladder have dropped right there in Martin Luther King’s kitchen??

Ten years later Dr. King was organizing a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the state capitol. The first attempt was an utter disaster. Alabama state troopers waded into the crowd of marchers with clubs. They sent over 50 to the hospital, some seriously injured. This became known as Bloody Sunday. But Dr. King and the protestors regrouped. To keep up their courage, as they did throughout the Civil Rights Era, they sang. Mostly they sang traditional spirituals that had been handed down to them by their slave ancestors. Carl Benkert, a white man, had come down from Detroit to join the march. He brought with him a bulky tape recorder. He put

it under his overcoat to hide it from the police, and he recorded dozens of songs sung during the marches. On the day Dr. King led the marchers to Montgomery, this is one of the first songs Carl Benkert recorded:

Here play the recording of a portion of “Jacob’s Ladder” sung by the marchers:

We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, we are climbing Jacob’s ladder

We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross!

As these brave men and women marched and sang, they were reminded of the promise God made to Jacob at the foot of a ladder. They understood that promise to be made to them too – that he would walk with them on the long road to freedom, that he would bring them home to the promised land. As Martin Luther King had earlier told the marchers: **“Keep moving ...with the faith that what we are doing is right, and with the even greater faith that God is with us in the struggle!”** I wonder whether there were marks of a ladder on the linoleum floor of Dr. King’s kitchen? On the bloody road between Selma and Montgomery?

Sometimes we find ourselves wandering in a desert – spiritually dried out and parched. Like Jacob and Dr. King, we also may be filled with feelings of regret, fear, uncertainty, even hopeless. Then, unexpectedly, our Lord Jesus comes to us, meets us as we are and where we are: in our kitchens, on the road, in a hospital bed. In spontaneous acts of love by family and friends; in a sympathetic gesture from a neighbor or even a stranger. In mysterious guises Jesus comes when most needed, and least expected. But we need to be alert, or we might miss him. For a ladder can drop anywhere. There at the foot of the ladder we need only respond. We could say No – or we could join Jacob, Dr. King and those courageous marchers and say: **“Yes! Awesome! Surely the Lord is in this place! This is the gate of heaven!”**

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