

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
August 2, 2020

Series: Quarantine Editions
Sermon: Going Up!

Genesis 28:10-22 (NIV)

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. 11 When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

16 When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

18 Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear 21 so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God 22 and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Sermon

In the pioneer days, most of Oregon City was down by the river, on the first level by the Willamette. But as the city grew, it moved into the upper bluffs that overlooked the old territorial capital. The old trails were OK, but there were 722 steps to go up and down. 108 years ago, the city put a ballot measure in for a "Public Elevator at the Bluff". It failed in the July vote, but passed in December. Everybody wanted an elevator, but no one wanted in their backyard, especially those in the nicer houses on the bluff. The city picked the spot and informed that land owner that there was to be an easement on their property. They refused, and it went to the state supreme court. The property owner lost, and the city began their building. In spite, the property owner refused to ride the elevator for the rest of their days and always took the stairs. Their loss.

The elevator could be powered by water or by electricity, although water was the cheaper choice. The water board objected, claiming that it would be a burden on the Oregon City water systems. The City Commissioners fixed that problem by firing all of the Water Board and replacing them with members of the City commissioners. This also went to court, and the Commissioners won. The water board had a point, however, every time the elevator was going, the water pressure dropped in the town. The elevator opened in 1915, and they gave 3,869 rides that day, almost the whole population of OC at that time. Each ride took 3-5 minutes, a wheezing and jerking ride. At the top you had to cross a 35 foot catwalk over the chasm over the trains. When the elevator broke down, which it did on occasion, everyone had to go through a trap door in the floor and climb an open-air ladder back down.

Fast forward to the 50's and it was apparent that a new elevator was needed. It was to be built "as plain as possible without adornment". No fancy elevator for you. Instead of a catwalk across the top, they moved the elevator to the other side of the tracks up against the bluff, with the tunnel under the tracks. Instead of a ride of several minutes, the ride is now 15 seconds. The Oregon City Municipal Elevator continues to operate as one of only four municipal elevators in the world and "Elevator Street" remains the only "vertical street" in North America. It has an operator, and every now and then Samantha and I volunteer to take over for a while so the operator can take a 20 minute bathroom break. It's one of the things that make Oregon City special and unique.

We have a special story in Genesis, not about an elevator, but about a ladder. You might remember the story. Isaac was an old man and was dying and was going to give his blessing to Esau. But Jacob, Esau's brother, tricked his father into giving him the blessing instead. Esau, understandably, was livid about this because he was to inherit nothing from Isaac as a result. So, in 27:41, Esau says, "The time to mourn my father's death is near; then I will kill Jacob." Rebecca, the mother, overheard what Esau said and warned Jacob and told him to go and stay with his uncle in Haran until Esau's anger cooled off.

So Jacob leaves home and flees for his life. And that's where we pick up the story. Jacob is running for his life; he is scared, tired, lonely, he is carrying deep pain inside, feeling guilty, maybe even feeling remorseful for what he has done. This was his first time away from his family. Jacob is in a dark, dark place.

There's three things I want to focus on in this regard...

First, We are all on a Journey into God's healing. For all of us, life is a Journey. We come from God and we are journeying back to him. But at times in our lives, we seem to lose our way on our journey. Look at Jacob - his journey had come to a temporary halt. He was languishing, tired, over-wrought in some anonymous part of the country, doesn't even have a name. Jacob was not expecting anything to happen. He had no desire to meet with God at this point in his life. His only concern was survival. He was running away from his brother Esau who wanted to kill him. And more than that, when he saw the Ladder, it was in a dream. Jacob was asleep and there is no other time when we are least in control of our destiny than when we are asleep. Can you control your dreams? I can't. And so this picture of Jacob reflects the life situation of some of us, perhaps. Tired, scared, with the spirit of adventure knocked out of us. Perhaps some of us do not feel in control of our own destiny...we are on our journey through life and we currently find ourselves at this certain place, which is an uncomfortable place to be. And we may be feeling just too tired to do anything about it...or not know what to do about it or maybe feel unworthy to have God sort us out...Like Jacob, we find ourselves at this certain place of discomfort.

If that describes your situation, then there is good news...

Fact #2. God meets us on that Journey. The crunch point of the passage is that God chooses to meet with Jacob and brings healing to him and encourages him into a life of faith. There is an encounter here between Jacob and God. And that, ultimately, is what healing is: it is a personal encounter with the Living God. This story of Jacob has a beautiful picture in it - the picture of a stairway from heaven to earth and there are angels ascending and descending. Heaven isn't some far off truth only to consider at some other time, but it's a reality that God is active in the world today. Now this may seem like an obvious point but it needs stressing. This story is often known as Jacob's Ladder. But, actually, the Ladder is not the important point at all. What completely revolutionize Jacob's life is not the Ladder but what God says to him. The Ladder is just the means. What counts is the promise that God makes to Jacob.

In this passage from Genesis 28, there is a 3-fold Promise from God to Jacob: The Promise of Presence: vs. 15: "I will be with you"; The Promise of Protection: vs. 15: "I will protect you wherever you go"; The Promise of Blessing: vs. 14: "Through you I will bless all nations". The Word of God to Jacob, the Word of God to each one of us today is the same: God promises to be present with us through our trials in life, God promises to

protect us in our most vulnerable times, God promises to pour out abundant blessings on our lives. Healing begins when we receive this word from God, when we encounter God's presence, protection and blessing.

We have thought about him being on a Journey. We have noted that God meets with Jacob on his journey. Thirdly, and finally, we note that Jacob makes a response. The reality is that, when we are encountered by God, we must make a response to him. Jacob, in this story, responds in 3 ways...First, this anonymous place, no-man's land, this place becomes crucial, vs. 18: "Jacob got up early the next morning, took the stone that was under his head, and set it up as a memorial. Then he poured olive oil on it to dedicate it to God. He named the place Bethel which means House of God". Remember the "el" from the children's sermon?

Like Jacob, we may still be full of doubts – but that's OK. Our doubts do not negate the promise of God in our lives. The promises of God are greater than our doubts. God's words are as true to us today as they were to Jacob all those years ago: "Remember, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised you." But if you want to ride the elevator, you gotta push the button. And the door will open.

God waits on us today and wants to encounter us here today. But you have to push the button, metaphorically. And so we come with our faith, and with our doubts and we ask God to bless us and to journey with us so that we know his blessings this day and for evermore. Amen.