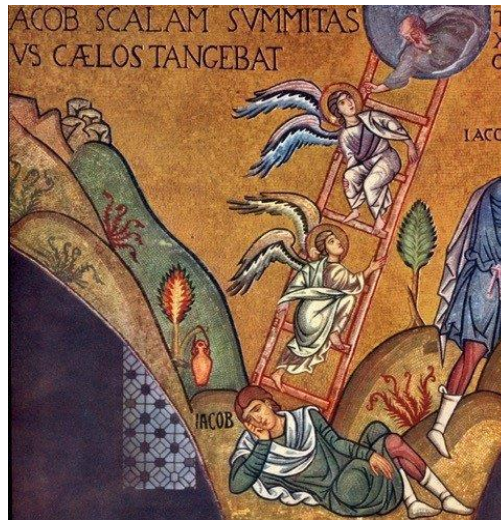


TRUSTING GOD'S PRESENCE



Scripture:

Psalms 86:11-17

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. ¹²I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. ¹³For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. ¹⁴O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. ¹⁵But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. ¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl. ¹⁷Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, "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; ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."
¹⁸So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



TRUSTING GOD'S PRESENCE

Wow! Crazy dream! Have you ever had a dream that was so intense? In Jacob's dream, God spoke to him and reassured him that he would keep his promises. And he said, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

DREAMS

Often we don't remember our dreams. We might wake up remembering part of it and then it disappears from our memories in an instant.

But this dream for Jacob was very special. He needed this dream. It was a dream of healing reassurance that God was with him and for him despite the turmoil he was in. Jacob had this dream when he was on the run from his brother, Esau, who was out to murder him for the ways Jacob had tricked him into giving up his birthright and first born blessing.

This story is one of the Old Testament soap opera-like dramas. I encourage you to go home and read it from start to finish. The twists and turns in this story are fascinating! These characters are the ancestors of Jesus Christ, and thus our spiritual ancestors, too.

FAITH JOURNEYS

By examining the story surrounding Jacob's amazing dream, we are learning about the faith journey of one of our ancestors.

Faith journeys have a lot to teach us. Next Sunday, Ray Alden will be preaching and sharing about his faith journey and his concept of how God is with us in body, mind, and spirit. We are looking forward to hearing more about Ray's faith and understanding of God.

We all need the reassurance of God's presence but especially in times of turmoil when our journey in life gets hard and complicated. Jacob's life was full of turmoil. Some of it he brought on himself, some of it his mother brought to him, and some of it was just what happens in life. Random chaos existed then as it does now.

This family's life was full of deceit mixed with faithfulness and difficulties. And yet today, we proudly recognize them as our ancestors in

the faith, direct descendants of Abraham and Sarah. God was so steadfastly faithful to this family even when they were untrusting of God's power.

JACOB BEHAVED LIKE A CROOK

Some even called Jacob a crook.

A book called *Beyond Words* by Frederick Buechner discusses the way Jacob behaved like a crook. Twice he cheated his brother Esau out of what was coming to him. He played his father for a sucker. And later in the next chapter, Jacob double crosses his uncle and father-in-law, Laban, to get the wife he wants. (In chapter 29.)

In today's part of the story, Jacob is making his getaway up into the hill country when he decides to camp out for the night. He finds a stone for a pillow and falls into a tormented sleep. But instead of having a nightmare, he dreams the kind of dream that Buechner calls a dream "reserved for high saints."

In his amazing dream, Jacob heard God beside him speaking affirming words rather than chewing him out for being so mean to his brother. And God told Jacob that the land he was lying on was going to belong to him and that his descendants would multiply into a great nation and be a blessing to all the earth.

The lesson for Jacob in this dream was that he could stop hustling, stop striving for a life of blessing because God had already given him one, that the love of God was always readily available to him. He could stop conniving and running and slow down to become aware of God's loving presence.

Buechner says another part of the lesson in this passage is that "God doesn't love people because of who they are, but because of who God is." Love is, so to speak, "on the house." It is "by grace" and not by hustling and striving. We don't need to strive to earn our way into heaven. Your ticket was pre-paid.

God's grace and mercy and steadfast love came to earth in the form of Jesus to remind us of this good news of the gospel. Because God so loves the world, the whole world.

A MODERN DAY STORY

Esau and Jacob's story reminded me of a modern day story I read about two other brothers, Tommy and Timmy. They were both known as troublemakers because they enjoyed stealing anything they could get their hands on, even from the church. One day the pastor stopped Timmy, who was the youngest, on his way out the door and asked, "Where is God?"

Timmy shrugged and the pastor repeated, "Where is God?" Timmy pulled away from the pastor and ran out of the church crying all the way home where he hid in a closet. Eventually his brother, Tommy, found him and asked, "What's wrong?" Timmy sobbed, "We're in trouble now! God is missing and they think we took him!"

BARGAINING WITH GOD

Isn't it true we all try to hustle sometimes to get what we can out of this life? We may not directly steal things. But we might try to bargain with God and others to get what seems like a secure living or the things we think we need to have for a good life.

I remember bargaining with God for a horse when I was about nine years old. I was in the house. I looked up and prayed to God and said that I would believe in him if God would bring me a horse. And I was pretty specific. I wanted a white stallion or a palomino like the horse, Trigger, that Roy Rogers rode. I thought it was nice to give God options.

And then, like any good hustler/negotiator, I added a threat to my wishful prayer. I said, "God, if you don't bring me a horse then I'm not going to believe in you and I'm going to be mad at you!" Nine years old!

Then I ran outside to see if a horse had just showed up on our driveway. And guess what? There was no horse. So I tried three times, and then gave up. But I must admit I never quit believing in God. I'm guessing God knew that was going to happen. But isn't that crazy? I

thought I had some power to make God do my bidding! But the good part of my nine year old faith, was that I thought God really cared about little ol' me enough to possibly listen about my wish for a horse.

I had to wait three years, but to my surprise, on my twelfth birthday I got a horse, but not a white stallion. It was a pinto, both black and white, and I loved that pony! I named him Rocky because he could run like a rocket.

HUSTLING GOD

My former pastor, Craig Barnes, wrote a book called *Hustling God: Why We Work So Hard for What God Wants to Give*. In his book, he examines the lives of the main characters in Genesis.

Dr. Barnes reassures us that we have not been abandoned to wander our lives in search of a blessing. He says the blessing will find us if we stop running."

**In reference to this passage for today about Jacob's dream Dr. Barnes said,
"Worship is the ladder between heaven and earth. Angels descend here to tell you (through words and song) the most amazing news: God will give the blessing to you...."**

JACOB'S LADDER

Jacob was given hope by his dream of the ladder connecting heaven to earth. In his dream he listened to God's promises and heard God's affirming voice. This strengthened Jacob for the rest of his journey and he went on to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the great, great, many times great grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Prince of Peace.

Jacob's close encounter with God happened when he was in deep fear for his life. He knew he had messed up grandly and deserved his brother's anger. Yet it was in that dark place where he found God alongside him in his time of desperation. Then the scripture says he woke up excited and afraid.

I guess that makes sense. When we truly connect with God and feel God's glory and power, it is frightening and reassuring at the same time. To know we don't have control over God's power and to trust in God's presence takes humility and a release of our striving. Like learning to float, you just let go and relax and let God hold you up.

Can you do that? Can you rest back in God's arms and let God give you rest? That takes a lot of trust. And I think we have trouble trusting because we hate to be disappointed. But Paul Coelho, a Brazilian poet and spiritual writer said, "Disappointment, defeat, and despair are the tools God uses to show us the way."

BECOME AWARE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

How do we become aware of God's presence even in the midst of disappointment, defeat and despair? Stop running and striving, slow down enough to worship and be grateful, and look for God's grace in the small moments of your life.

Forgive, be patient, give hope and feel the positive responses of those around you. God is in those responses, the smiles, the hugs, the beautiful sunsets and in the fragrance of the roses.

On this topic, Rob Bell says, "It's one thing to sing about God and recite quotes about God and invoke God's name; it's another to be aware of the presence of God in every taste, touch, sound, and embrace."

When the TV news is more and more depressing, when the doctor says the cancer diagnosis is confirmed, when our budget at the end of the month doesn't stretch quite far enough, we must remember God is with us and we are not alone in the turmoil. We have a source for hope and strength. Jesus is always waiting to teach us, help us, suffer with us, and give us hope because God is always for us even if the world's chaos feels against us.

God is still saying to each one of us, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Amen

Benediction:

Many years after Jacob and after the death of Moses, Joshua was chosen to lead the twelve tribes of Israel. His most famous victory was the battle of Jericho, which was won, thanks to the great wisdom of Rahab, another ancestor of Jesus.

God also spoke powerful words to Joshua that helped him win the battle. I encourage you to carry these words out with you today. (They echo the words spoken to Jacob seven-hundred years earlier.) God speaks these words to you today. God wants you to *be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*

(Joshua 1:9)

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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