

Written Copy: "Good News of a Savior Who Unites Heaven and Earth"

Midweek Lent #4

Wednesday, April 2nd, 2025

Text: Genesis 28:12-17

¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it 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. ¹⁴ 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, 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."

Exegetical Statement

Jacob was all alone and on the run from Esau, fearing for his life. He came to a certain place when the sun had set and fell asleep. There the LORD came to this sinful unbeliever and revealed Himself to Jacob in a dream about a ladder. The dream symbolized God's coming down, protecting and blessing him through His angelic servants. And the LORD Himself appeared at the top of the stairs and introduced Himself as the same God who originally blessed Jacob's grandfather, and his father Isaac. Even though he is undeserving the LORD gives to Jacob the same Patriarchal blessings of the land of Canaan for his many offspring, and through one of his offspring would come the Savior promised to Eve who would bless all nations. His great multitude of offspring who are united by the faith of Abraham, which now has been given to Jacob, will spread out all over the world as the LORD's church. Wherever he may go the LORD promises to watch over and protect him. He will most certainly bring Jacob back to this land. And He will not forsake Jacob until all these promises have come to pass for him. Jacob woke up and realized that the LORD had been present in this place and calls it the house of God. He calls on the LORD to fulfill the promises He has given to him and promises that the LORD will be God to him. He erects a stone monument to memorialize and remind his offspring of this glorious vision and the promises given for the future.

Focus Statement:

Just as with Jacob the LORD doesn't wait for us to come to Him or be good enough to meet with Him. We don't have to climb the ladder to be with Him because in Jesus Christ He has come down to us. He brings His kingdom of heaven, His reign and rule into our hearts and lives. He makes us good enough to dwell in His presence now and forever in eternal life. HE promises to be with us every day through His indwelling Spirit guiding, protecting, and providing. He is never far from us, not way up in heaven, but present with us at all times, and we will be present with Him for eternity. He unites heaven and earth in our hearts.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

When we are on the run from problems and troubles in life, feeling we are all alone, we might wonder where God is and where we can go to find Him. We may wonder does He see us. We may think we have to be in Sanctuary at worship to meet with Him. We have to first make ourselves good enough for Him to come to us and save us.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Remain united and connected to Him through Word and Sacrament. Pray to Him, knowing He is not far off but is present with you and in you. He comes when we ask, and even when we don't providing all that is needed for life now all the way to eternity. His Spirit unites us together as His dwelling place, His Church.

Introduction

In our Old Testament Lesson, our English Standard Version says in **Genesis 28:12** **And he (Joseph) dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven.** But the New International Version, along with a few other modern translations call it a “stairway which reached up from earth to heaven. Now if you are around my age, the concept of a “Stairway to Heaven” brings to mind this: [play 25 second sample of Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”]. It brings to mind one of the most well-known rock and roll songs of the 1970’s and on, Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”.

A good friend of mine who I worked for at the Seminary in St. Louis told me a story involving him and this song. When he was in high school, his band, which included teenage members of his home church, were asked to play for worship one Saturday night. Saturday night service was one with a more contemporary bent. As a pre-service song they played “Stairway to Heaven” on a weekend when our Old Testament Lesson from Genesis was being read. He said they were never asked back to play after that.

If you don’t know the song, or even if you do, you might wonder what the big deal was. It starts off pretty and melodic enough, but I guarantee it doesn’t stay that way. The electric guitars come booming in and the drums begin to pound. And over and above that, the lyrics really have nothing to do with what God is trying to teach us in this Old Testament Lesson. Here is a sample: ***“There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold. And she’s buying a stairway to Heaven. When she gets there, she knows, if the stores are all closed, with a word she can get what she came for. Ooh, ooh, and she’s buying a stairway to Heaven”*** What is the song writer Robert Plant really trying to communicate in this song? There is a lot of debate about that. But there is nothing Scriptural about ***“buying a Stairway to Heaven”*** or buying your way into the good graces of God in order to be in His presence. Yet there are many Christians who, knowingly or unknowingly, buy into that idea. It goes something like this: Jesus’ death and resurrection earns us a spot on the ladder to heaven. But we must climb up it by our own good works, earning our way into His increased love and favor. Of course, no one can make it all the way to the top in their lifetime. That’s where purgatory comes in, the place where, when you die, you finish off earning favor or have your loved ones on earth earn some for you. But that is not the example we are given in our Scripture Lessons this evening.

Jacob’s Story Leading Up to This Vision

Let’s take a look at Jacob’s situation leading up to this vision to better understand why the LORD provided it.

Jacob was on the run from Esau, his twin brother, who was so mad at him he threatened to kill him. Why was he so mad? Because the birthright, which included the Patriarchal Blessing was supposed to be his. He was the firstborn, born right before his twin brother Jacob who came out grasping at his heel. Then, when they were older, when Esau came back from a hunt famished, scheming and conniving Jacob talked him into trading away his birthright in order to eat. Later, it came time for Isaac to pass on the blessing that would mark one of his sons the Patriarch, the one from whom the promised offspring of Eve would come, Isaac was all set to give that to Esau. But Isaac was old and blind. Jacob and his mother took advantage of that and tricked Isaac into believing Jacob was really Esau. Jacob actually lied point blank to his father Isaac claiming to be Esau. So, Isaac gave him the blessing.

When Esau came back from the hunt to feed his dad and receive his blessing, the truth of what Jacob had done was brought to light. Isaac could not give that Patriarchal blessing to Esau, but instead his blessing now stated the older son would serve the younger! And Esau was mad enough to kill.

Rebekah, Jacob's mother acted quickly to save her favorite son. Esau had married two local Canaanite women, much to mom and dad's dismay. Rebekah pleads with Isaac to allow Jacob to leave at once and head for Rebekah's brother's house in faraway Haran and search for a wife among those related to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather. Isaac agrees and sends him off. But the real purpose behind this trip at this very moment is to get Jacob as far away from Esau as possible, and as soon as possible.

So, Jacob takes off by himself, with no servants or family accompanying him. He probably had a limited number of supplies. He's alone, and he's scared. Also evident in all this is his lack of faith. At no time does he turn to the LORD in prayer and ask for His help and guidance with this birthright problem. He travels about 40 miles, probably walking at a fast pace and not taking too many breaks. So, by the time the sun sets he is exhausted and done in. He's worn out and tired enough to use a stone as his pillow.

What the LORD Is Saying to Jacob In This Vision

It is with Jacob in this state that the LORD God comes to Him. In his dream he sees a ladder. There isn't a real ladder or stairway structure there. This is a vision meant to communicate not a physical reality but a spiritual one. Notice that at no time does Jacob ever step foot on the ladder and attempt to climb up. Nor is he invited to. Who is on the ladder ascending and descending? God's angels, His ministering spirits on behalf of mankind. The symbolic message here is that they will be God's means to provide for Jacob, but also communicate Jacob's wants, needs, and prayers to God Himself.

Genesis 28:13a **There at the top stood the LORD, who said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.**

Who is at the top of the stairs? The LORD God Himself. Jacob does not have a faith relationship with God, so the LORD introduces Himself to Jacob as the same God who appeared to his grandfather Abraham and told him to leave his home in Babylon and be a sojourner in this land of Canaan. He is the same God who appeared to his father Isaac. He is the same God who gave them the gift of faith so that they could put their trust in Him and His great promises. Through that gift of faith the LORD called them to be a part of His kingdom, His reign and rule, His work here on earth, and so uniting them on earth with the work of heaven. Now the LORD God was calling Jacob to be a part of that work too.

Genesis 28:13b-14 ^{13b} The land on which you are lying, I give to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. In you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.

The LORD gave to Jacob the same promises of blessings that his father and grandfather received, that this land would be given to his offspring. And the number of those offspring would be like the sand of the sea and stars of the sky, as promised to Abraham, or here to Jacob as numerous as the dust of the earth. And also included is that same promise that was given to Adam and Eve all the way back in the Garden of Eden after the Fall: that One particular Offspring to come would bless all of the families of the earth. This is the Offspring who would crush the head of the serpent and free us from bondage to sin, death, and the devil. And He would be a descendent of Jacob!

Jacob was not worthy of these promises. He had done nothing to deserve them or earn them. They came as the free gift of the grace of God, who chose this scared, broken, sinful man to be the one whom He would build a great nation from. He did that simply because He loved Jacob.

Genesis 28:15 Now, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back again into this land. Indeed, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you."

The LORD God who rules in heaven had come to Jacob on earth. He didn't just make an appearance only to disappear back into heaven and leave Jacob once again to his own devices. He promises to remain with him, watching over him wherever he goes, even when he sinfully disobeys, guarding his way, guarding his life. He will eventually tell Jacob, after he marries and has children, to return to this land. The LORD will even take on human form and wrestle with Jacob to prepare him for his meeting with Esau. Through this working of the LORD, through His reign and rule being manifested in Jacob's life, we see Heaven and earth being united in God's governing of Jacob's life of faith.

What the LORD is Saying to You in this Vision

So what is the LORD saying to you in this vision? He's not telling you to climb up any ladder in order to have a faith relationship with Him. The truth is, God Himself came down to find and call you.

John 1:51 "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Jesus, in our Gospel Reading, speaking to all of His disciples, quotes the vision of Jacob. Except notice that there is no mention of a ladder. There isn't a need any more for a ladder. The separation that was emphasized by the ladder in Jacob's dream is no longer in effect. Jesus Christ is God the Son who has come down to dwell among mankind. He is the reign and rule of God, heaven come down to earth, to dwell and minister to His people. He has come to make all mankind good enough to be in His kingdom by faith in His atoning sacrifice and resurrection.

In Christ, at His baptism, Heaven was opened, and the Father spoke testifying that Jesus is His beloved Son. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father came down in a cloud and spoke, Heaven opened as Jesus shown with the glory that is His as God the Son incarnate. In His death with the veil in the temple torn in two, heaven was opened. And in His resurrection, Jesus showed that for all who believe in Him as Lord and Savior, heaven and the door to eternal life will stand open on the Last Day.

Until that day, Heaven and earth remain united in you, by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is the reign and rule of God alive and working in you. He is the God who promises to watch over you, direct you, and guide you. He is the God by whose gift of faith you have become one of Jacob's offspring, through the same faith in the promises of God that declared Abraham to be in right standing. He is the God who has called you into the body of Christ, the Church, which has spread across the four directions of the compass.

Just as the LORD promised to go with Jacob no matter where he traveled to watch over him and protect him, that is the work of God the Holy Spirit in your life right now. Yes, He protects you from temporal disasters. But He protects you from wandering away from Him as well. He does that by showing you in your life all the ways you act more like Jacob, more like a "heel grabber", more like a conniving manipulator who thinks he can get away with sinfully pleasing his own heart in disobedience to God. He is the Spirit who through God's Word calls you out on it and calls you back into a repentant faith relationship with Him. Just as God did with all the problems that happened to Jacob and the fear and worry he had over his sins, the Spirit uses those in your life and mine to turn us back from relying on ourselves and instead by faith cling to our Lord and Savior, who died and rose again so we could be blessed with forgiveness and grace in abundance.

Conclusion

The lady in the Led Zepplin song will be sorely mistaken if she thinks she can buy the stairway to heaven. On Judgement Day all the shops will be closed, and she will discover that she could never have enough gold or works to earn for herself eternal life. Anyone else who trusts in their own works to earn their way into Christ's favor, His love, and into His presence now as well as in eternity to come, must ask themselves: "What is the cost?" And the answer is you must be perfect. And none of us are.

Instead by faith we are given the perfection of Jesus Christ. He has earned for us a place before God right now through the gift of faith that relies on all Jesus has done for us, all His works. And you cannot do enough to earn his love, and you don't need to. You have it already. He loved Jacob certainly not because of what he had done, but because of who God is. And that is true for you too. It's not about who you are, but who Jesus is as our gracious and loving God. And His Spirit is at work in you to keep you relying on Jesus. The Spirit remains with you, watching over you, showing you your sin and then showing you your Savior to keep you in a repentant faith relationship with Him every day of your life. He unites the work of heaven here on earth in your heart and mind, so that when it's your time to be called home, there is no stairway to climb. The Lord sends His angels to welcome you into His real presence, into all that Christ has earned for you and gives you by faith. Amen.