

Southminster Presbyterian Church ~ Sunday 7/23/2023

Genesis 28:10-16

Sermon: This Place

Rev. Linda McCarty

Jacob's Ladder. When was the last time you sang that song? Jacob's Ladder, a staple for every Bible or Sunday School teacher. A peacefully sleeping Jacob cut out of felt hanging precariously on a felt board attended by felt angels strategically placed about a ladder made of popsicle sticks or toothpicks. At least that's how I remember my Jacob in Sunday school at the First Baptist Church on Pennsylvania Avenue. Sweet Jacob, sleeping so peacefully while angels watched over him.

No matter how many times I see the stunning renditions of Jacob's ladder by Chagall, Rembrandt, Raphael, or William Blake, my Jacob will always be made of felt, sleeping slightly askew on a felt board.

And of course the song, As I was writing this sermon, the melody was singing to me, and that led to a varying medley of old Sunday school songs – The Lord said to Noah, or He's Got the whole world in his hands, This Little Light of Mine, I'm Going to let it shine, but I always seem to wind up with Zacchaeus up in that Sycamore Tree. All the great Bible stories in song. As a child, I always loved Jacob. I saw him as a very, very important young man. Someone to look up to, to be like, because he loved God, who was close to God, someone God loved so much that God's angels hovered about him.

I had no idea then that Jacob's story was far from a heartwarming story of a good young man and peaceful sleep and angels. I had no idea that Jacob's story was one of deception and betrayal and pain. Of exile, fear and shame.

I had no idea that his was a story of God's of grace, forgiveness, hope and redemption in the face of the deepest kind of pain and loss and fracture. A story of the love of God that creates a way when there is no way. The love of God that gives new life, new hope, when no life or hope seems possible.

You see, Jacob had just shattered his family. He violated the love and trust of those closest to him and he could never take it back. He lied to his father, Isaac, pretending to be his twin, Esau, and convincing his blind father, Isaac, to bless, him, Jacob, to pass on to Jacob, the blessing and birthright that rightfully belonged to his twin, Esau.

He did it with cunning and premeditation. He knew exactly what he was doing. Jacob betrayed those closest to him, his father and his twin brother, to get what he wanted. He betrayed those who should have been able to count on him, trust him, more than any other.

When Esau heard what Jacob had done, he cried out in great anguish, 'but Father, please bless, bless me.' But the damage had been done. Esau not only lost his birthright, but he was forced to live with the knowledge that it was his twin who had betrayed him – the deepest wound – betrayal by the one closest to you.

And then all of the sudden, Jacob finds himself cast out, alone in the desert running for his life, Esau, in a fit of rage, vowing to kill him. He's forced to leave all that he has ever known, leaving behind devastation and fractured relationships. Sent off into exile, cut off from all that mattered to him, he is now a man in despair, alone, and knowing that his own actions, his own betrayal caused his exile, his uncertain future. No longer confident, wily, in control.

Imagine the shame and fear, the confusion and regret. The wanting to turn the clock back. Questioning what he had done, who he was. Imagine his thoughts as he took step after step away from his beloved home, knowing that his father's disappointment was deep, his brother's rage raw and deserved.

Night descends, and exhausted he takes a stone for a pillow and sleeps. But, he does not dream, as one might expect, of devils and demons chasing him. Rather he dreams a vision. A stairway with angels descending and ascending and God right there beside him telling him that God will always be with him, will never leave him, will bless him, even him, the one who lied, who betrayed, the one who was the least deserving of God's love.

The vision where God gave Jacob the blessing that could not be stolen or usurped. The blessing that can never be stolen or usurped. The blessing that can only be humbly received. Grace, pure grace. God's life-giving love to one who does not believe that he deserves it, to one who does not feel worthy of being loved at all.

Jacob awakes from his sleep and cries out with a heart full of wonder and awe, "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." For God had met Jacob in the place of his exile, the place of his fear, his guilt and his shame, the place of his deepest and darkest despair. God stood beside Jacob in this place, even this place, loving him still.

The Jacob who awakes still carries the wounds he had the day before, the knowledge of the wounds he himself had inflicted. This vision of God did not make everything better. And he continued to pay the price for his actions over the years.

But now, Jacob sees the world differently, because he has felt the love of God wash over him. He's realized that no matter how unlovable he himself believes himself to be, or how unloveable the world believes him to be, that God would always love him. And, because of that knowledge Jacob found a way when there was no way. He saw a glimmer of hope that pointed the way to new life, that would be grounded in the knowledge that God promised to be with him always.

He now saw that he had work to do, purpose, now that he saw his life in the context of God right there beside him. "*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it,*" says the psalmist. So, Jacob, the liar, the cheat, falls to his knees and worships God. Overwhelmed by the grace of God that offers a way when there is no way. Who gives life and hope when no life or hope seems possible.

I have to admit, this Jacob, this Jacob, I can relate to him much more than I can to the young man who slept so peacefully surrounded by felt angels all those years ago. I can relate because he knows all about broken relationships and what it is to feel lost and alone.

We all know a little bit about that don't we? Don't we know what it feels like to want to turn the clock back. To wish the words hadn't been said, that they were still here, to wish it never had happened. To wish that we didn't feel so worthless and so alone and so afraid. That there is no hope to heal that rift.

We, too, have moments, don't we when the night is never ending. When we cry out to God, not sure if we believe that there is even a God to hear us in the depths of our despair. Our cries of "I believe, help my unbelief." Wendell Berry captures such a moment in his untitled poem:

A man is lying on a bed
In a small room in the dark.
Weary and afraid, he prays
For courage to sleep, to wake
And work again; he doubts
That waking when he wakes
Will recompense his sleep.
His prayers lean upward
On the dark and fall like flares
From a catastrophe.
He is a man breathing the fear
Of hopeless prayer, prayed
In hope.
He breathes the prayer

Of his fear that gives a light
By which he sees only himself
Lying in the dark, a low mound
Asking almost nothing at all.
And, then, long yet before dawn,
Comes what he had not thought:
Love that causes him to stir
Like the dead in the grave, being
Remembered – his own love or Heaven's, he does not
know.
But now it is all around him;
It comes down upon him
Like a summer rain falling
Slowly, quietly in the dark.

A hopeless prayer prayed in hope... and then....God is in this place, and I did not know it.

We are all products of our pasts, like Jacob, aren't we? What we have done to others. The times we have cheated and lied, when we have turned our back on those within our own families or others when we have crossed to the other side of the street or rolled our windows up at a stoplight. I'm sure we each have thoughts maybe even right now of a moment when we'd like to turn the clock back. Wish he or she was still in our lives. Or wish we could have done it differently. Been better.

And, of course, there are times when we have been wounded. When we have been Esau, standing dumb, frozen and confused in the face of a betrayal. Or have felt worthless, because someone we loved or respected treated us as if we had no worth. The times when we have lost what was most important to us so much so that we feel like we've lost ourselves, too, and cannot seem to find our way. All the things we hide behind a carefully maintained veneer, masking the places deep inside us for which we are ashamed. The hurting places that make it difficult to see ourselves worthy of being loved, to see our way to a future of new life and hope.

But we also have those moments, haven't we, when we inexplicably dream of God, and somehow sensing God standing right beside us in our places of exile and self-doubt, assuring us that we, no matter how broken, are loved, that there is a future for us with God guiding us and holding us. The times when we too can cry out, God is in this place. Maybe these moments have come by way of a dream, but more often than not, they come because someone has looked at us with love and acceptance in their eyes. Love and acceptance gently piercing the armor, telling us it is not true. We are loved. We are valued. There is a future awaiting us. God speaking through an angel standing right there before us. And, we catch our breath and whisper to ourselves. 'God is in this place and I did not know it.'

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes it like this: "God is not always silent, and man is not always blind. In every man's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal."

Opening a sight of the eternal. But the veil seems to obscure the sight of the eternal more often than not, and so we need to bring those moments to mind to get us through. Too often, we forget and again believe in our hearts that no one could possibly love us, if they knew who we 'really' were. How we have hurt others. How others have hurt us. When the night has fallen again.

I wonder how many times Jacob over the years strained to remember and hold onto that moment when he dreamt of angels, because he had once again felt lost and in shame and needed to cling to the time when he could cry out: 'God is in the place.' The ebbs and flows of faith that make up a life.

Until the day, more than 20 years later, he stepped into the breach and went to meet Esau. Until he wrestled with an angel and obtained a new name, in the dark night before he crossed the river, not knowing if his twin would seek revenge and act on his vow to kill him. Yet trusting still in the God who is in the business of creating a way when there is no way. Trusting in the God that can and does heal relationships and hearts. Trusting. And lo that next morning he saw Esau rushing toward him not with a sword but an embrace. But it was Jacob who made the first move.

You know, there are times when I must admit that I prefer my young sleeping Jacob with a magic marker smile on his lips. If I'm honest, there are times when I prefer him, because he doesn't make me face the broken relationships in my life, and he doesn't urge me to step out in faith to make a phone call or knock on a door or start a difficult conversation to seek or to offer forgiveness.

He doesn't ask me to open my wounded heart and take a chance that it might be broken yet again. Or ask me to lay down a long-held grudge or age-old slight. Or admit to myself how I am part of the problem.

But the Jacob who betrayed, who fell to his knees, who took God's love and forgiveness to heart, who followed, who wrestled and crossed the river? Who clung onto that moment when he felt God's love wash over him and acted on it, who let it guide him? He's another story.

Our childhood Jacob is sweet, but this Jacob, he's the one who calls us to put away childish things. And he assures us that we will be glad for it. For time and time again, when we risk ourselves for love, we will find ourselves falling to our knees, crying out in wonder God is in this place, and I did not know it.

Each and every day, we are given the gift of forgiveness, no matter what we have done or left undone. And that means each and every day, we are given the chance to forgive ourselves for what God has already forgiven, which frees us to more fully live into who God created us to be.

Each and every day, we are given the chance to forgive another. To step into the breach. Forgiveness to one who thinks he doesn't deserve it or cannot cross the river to seek it from you. To trust and believe that the God who is in the business of healing relationships and hearts will create a way when there is no way.

Each and every day, we are given the chance to be an angel for another in their darkest night as they pray a hopeless prayer prayed in hope. To be the vehicle through which they can see themselves forgiven and loved and valued.

So, my hope and prayer for you this week is that you spend a little time with Jacob. Listen to and for him in your heart. Listen for the memory of something for which you cannot forgive yourself that stops you from accepting God's

forgiveness. Listen for the call to reach out to another to offer forgiveness. It doesn't need to be in words, just showing up may be enough. Take a chance. Cross a river.

Look for the moment to be an angel for someone else, maybe someone you know, maybe not. To look at them, really look at them, so that they may know that no matter what they have done or said or the world has told them they are, that they are valued and worthy of the love of God, even if they don't feel themselves to be.

I know what I am asking is not easy. To reach out to someone who you have hurt or who has hurt you. Or to have a conversation even with someone who can no longer hear you. I am asking you to set aside your sleeping and peaceful Jacob and instead to pick up the Jacob who fought on the banks of a river the early dawn before he crossed that river to meet Esau. But I am certain that if you do, you will be witnessing to the forgiving love of God that creates a way when there is no way. And, I suspect you just might find yourself falling to your knees and whispering, God is in the place, and I did not know it. May it be so. Amen and Amen.

Prayer of Peace – Rick Pfleeger

So far this year 349 people have been murdered in Chicago. The Chicago chief of police is quick to point out that that is less than last year. I ask you is that any consolation for the families of the victims? It is hard to think about peace when we live in such a violent angry society. The peace we search for is more than just tranquility. The peace of God is different from the peace of the world. Biblical peace is more than just the absence of conflict; it is taking action to restore a broken situation. It's more than a state of inner tranquility; it's a state of wholeness and completeness.

Biblical peace is not something we can create on our own; it is a fruit of the Spirit. God is the source of peace, and one of [His names](#) is Yahweh Shalom ([Judges 6:24](#)), which means the LORD Is Peace. Jesus is the prince of peace ([Isaiah 9:6](#)), and He gives us peace in three ways.

1. Peace with God
2. Peace with others
3. Peace with ourselves

Let us pray:

Father God

We pray for reconciliation with you. Please take the sins that separate us from you and forgiven them. Help us to find peace with others. Teach us to be quick to apologize and quick to forgive. To be people of mercy and grace. We ask for peace in our spirits. Teach us to forgive ourselves. To let go our our right to be angry or seek revenge. Such thoughts only cause us greater misery. Teach us to be more loving, to be peace makers. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.