

Date: July 17, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 16

SERMON: Up the Down Staircase

Text(s): Genesis 28:10-22

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One of the hazards of being a pastor (or a pastor's child) is that when you travel on family vacations, you often spend a fair amount of time looking at churches. Over the years of our travels, Carol and I have become fair students of church architecture. And, as I'm sure our daughters would be happy to tell you, they were forced to become more familiar with church architecture than they ever wanted to be.

The architecture of churches or houses of worship reflects something deep within the human psyche—the need to make a connection between heaven and earth. We long to know something or Someone bigger than and beyond ourselves or our mundane existence. Human beings are not only *homo sapiens*; we're also *homo religius*; we yearn to discover the gates of heaven. Up until the advent of the modern skyscraper, churches were usually the tallest buildings around, their steeples drawing the eye toward heaven, or at least dominating the earthly landscape. That's certainly the effect our own church tower has on many people who come up Maine Street, isn't it? While church steeples or towers may also reflect the vanity of the builders, they do draw the eye heavenward. (Some have suggested that the modern corporate office towers which are much taller than any church, are the new religious temples of our world, dedicated to our new world religion—the worship of the god Mammon or money, but that's another story.)

The story of Jacob's dream at Bethel is a story of a man who discovered that connection between earth and heaven. Probably the staircase or ladder in Jacob's dream was a mental image of the religious architecture of his day, the Babylonian or Sumerian ziggurats, those staircase-like pyramids which were the temples in the ancient Near East.

As this part of the story opens, Jacob is on the run. There's a good reason why he's fleeing for his life: he has twice cheated his twin brother Esau out of something that rightfully belonged to him. As we saw last week, at the twins' birth, Esau came out first, but Jacob emerged with a firm grasp on his brother's heel. As a result, he was given the name Jacob, which literally means "the heel-grabber." He has proven himself true to his namesake by immediately setting out, with his mother's help, to manipulate Esau into surrendering the inheritance which belonged by birthright to the first-born. He has also deceived his elderly, blind father Isaac into pronouncing the patriarchal blessing on him rather than on Esau.

When Esau discovers this last deception, he's naturally enraged, and is bent on doing his brother bodily harm or even killing him. Jacob has to flee for his life. Again, with his mother's help, (this is a very dysfunctional family) he sneaks away from home and sets out on a journey hundreds of kilometers across the desert to the ancestral home where Abraham his grandfather had come from many years before. It's a journey from the known to the unknown. He's fleeing to safety, or so he hopes, but in reality, he may be fleeing from one danger to another.

His own hubris, his own arrogant manipulation of others has caught up with him. For the first time in his life, he's not completely in control. Actually, he never was, but like most of us, he often thought he was or tried to be. But now he's vulnerable. He's got no one to help him and no one to care about him. He's alone in the universe, and the universe doesn't look very friendly at the moment. Better people than him have been swallowed up in the harshness of that desert; his very survival is at serious risk.

Up till now, there's nothing in the story that suggests that Jacob was particularly aware of God at all. Like many others before and since, he's the epitome of the self-made man. It's his life; he'll make of it what he can, and he'll take from others whatever he needs to make his own dreams and plans come to fruition. If he were

around today, we'd have no trouble recognizing him; in fact the sentencing of former WorldCom CEO Bernard Ebbers this past week has a lot of echoes of this story of Jacob, though so far, perhaps, without the redemptive parts.

And it's just here, when he's totally alone, that Jacob discovers that he's not as alone as he thinks and fears that he is.

Some years ago, I heard Father Tom Stransky, who at that time, was head of the Paulist order in the Roman Church, say that there are two different fears that we human beings have with respect to God—the fear of God's absence and the fear of God's presence. And in this story we see both of those fears at work in Jacob's life.

The first is the fear of the absence of God. I'd guess most of us have known that fear. When we face a crisis that calls for some deep response on our part, whether it's a life-threatening illness or the tragic loss of a loved one or a situation of physical danger or the recognition that our marriage is falling apart, we often feel afraid. We feel abandoned or alone, as Jacob did. Whatever it was that provided us with a center of gravity seems to have disappeared. We feel that we have no center of gravity. Chaos threatens. And that feeling of being totally vulnerable, of being alone, often is, at root, the fear that God is absent. Haven't we all felt like that at one time or another? Haven't we all had that sickening knot of fear in our gut that says, "Maybe God doesn't know or care about what's happening to me. Maybe God doesn't even exist. Maybe God was just a crutch constructed out of my own imagination. Maybe I'm all alone to face this situation, and if I am, I'm in big trouble." . I imagine most of us have experienced that fear at times; I know I have. What if it's all just "whistling in the dark?"

Some people, feeling that fear, become paralyzed; they become depressed and just can't seem to do anything to get themselves out of the hole they're in. They vegetate, drift aimlessly.

Others, like Jacob, allow that fear to spur them to fiercer struggle to get what they think they want and need for themselves. They become control freaks. If God isn't around, or can't be trusted to take care of me, then I've got to look out for myself. In either case, whether we are numbed into inaction or, like Jacob, become Promethean strugglers, stealing the divine fire and forging our own destiny in the face of heaven, we are acting out of our fear that God is absent, or at least not involved. We are, at least some of the time, practical atheists. And yet our very fear is itself a witness to our yearning for that connection with heaven. We want to know that God is real and that our lives have some larger meaning or purpose.

On the way to his ancestral home, Jacob camps out overnight on the barren, rocky ground, resting his head on a stone pillow, and during his sleep, he has a dream of a staircase or ladder from heaven down to earth, and on it, the angels of God ascending and descending. For the first time, Jacob becomes aware that there is a connection between earth and heaven. God stands beside him in his dream and tells him something he is hardly prepared to hear. God reiterates the covenant promises first made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. God promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes and to extend to him the blessing given to Abraham.

I'm sure many of us can remember a stressful or anxious time in our lives, when we were feeling lost and afraid, and then something happened that reassured us that we were going to be all right. It might even have been a dream that we interpreted as a sign that God's presence was with us. Or perhaps rather than a dream, it was a phone call or visit from a friend that came just at the right time or we came across a passage in a particular book or a passage of scripture that comforted us with the sense that we were not alone. At those times, we really felt God was with us. So it's natural that we might think that Jacob's dream would comfort and reassure him

as well.

But this is not, apparently, the effect of Jacob's dream of the ladder or staircase between earth and heaven. When he wakes up, it's not comfort or reassurance that he feels. Instead, the writer tells us, Jacob was afraid with the kind of fear we have when in the presence of some force or reality enormously powerful and beyond our imagination or control. It scares the daylight out of him. *"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not!"* he exclaims, *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."* The implication is, "Had I known it, I sure wouldn't have stopped here for the night." And so he sets up a stone pillar to mark this as a place where divine power lurks. It will warn other unwary travelers to steer clear unless they too want to be frightened by an uninvited visitor in their dreams.

I suspect that Jacob's fearful reaction to his discernment of God's presence is not that much different from what ours might be in similar circumstances. As frightened as we may sometimes become, thinking that God may have forgotten about us, we become even more nervous when we think God might be paying more attention to us than we're ready for.

In his book Miracles, C. S. Lewis addresses this reluctance we have to really want God to be too closely involved with us:

*An impersonal God—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth, goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap into—best of all. But God, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed— that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a **real** footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found God? We never meant it to come to*

that! Worse still, supposing God found us?

I suspect that for most of us, as for Jacob, this fear of God's presence may be the worse of the two fears. For once we become aware that God really is involved with our lives, that God really does have a purpose for this world, and that our lives, therefore, really do have a meaning, then we begin to feel compelled to do something about it. Some things in our lives will have to change. Some things in our relationships will have to change. Behaviors, attitudes, priorities, old resentments, old prejudices— all these will undergo some transformation. We'll have to either bend our will and our desires to fit in with God's will, or we'll have to fight against God. And God, we suspect, is an infinitely more formidable opponent than other people or the blind forces of fate. Other people we can manipulate. Circumstances we can control to a greater or lesser extent. But God? How can we protect ourselves from the Hound of Heaven? The psalm that we recited earlier says it well, *"Where shall I go or where shall I flee from your presence. . . Even if I take wing and flee to the uttermost parts of the earth, you are there."* How can we fight against God without going down in utter defeat?

Oh, we can do like Jacob did, and try to strike a bargain with God. He even promised God he would start tithing, giving ten percent of his possessions to God, if God would advance his cause. And you know he had to be desperate to promise that! But as Jacob will learn, God's not interested in bargaining with us. Neither Jacob nor we can manipulate God into giving us what we want or think we need. What God wanted of Jacob and what God wants of us is simply for us to trust, to believe that God loves us and wants to bless us, that God will be involved in our lives for our good. God wants us to learn to let go of our striving, our need to be in control, our manipulative behavior, and live in trust that the true meaning of our lives will be shown to us. Jacob has a long way to go before he learns that

kind of trust. As we'll see, he still has a lot of striving and manipulating to do. And most of us, like Jacob, will spend the best part of our lives learning to really trust God. But once the net of God's love and grace has dropped around us, it's very hard to escape. It's harder to fight against love than against hatred or indifference.

But from this moment onward, Jacob could never forget that he had dreamed of a staircase reaching from heaven to earth, and that dream began to work its magic in him until he found himself going up that down staircase.

There is a staircase; there is a ladder. There is a connection between heaven and earth, more than we can even dream. That's what Jacob learns and what we must learn. That connection is not something to be feared, but a connection that undergirds and supports our very existence. Far from being a fearful reality, that dream, when it comes to us, is the very thing that can fill us with hope, with meaning, with courage, with peace, even amid the most fearful experiences of life. Discerning where heaven intersects with our lives in both the crises and the routine experiences of life demands careful attention and long practice in looking for that connection. That's what prayer is about, among other things. Prayer is how we develop the spiritual insight to discern the angels of God going up and down the ladder. As Jacob found at Bethel, so we too will find the surprises of grace where we least expect them. If we're willing to trust that God is at work in those surprises, letting go of those things that hinder us, we'll gain strength and courage and reassurance so that we can continue the journey toward the future with hope and the confidence that God is indeed with us.