

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 19, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN”

Scriptures: Genesis 28:10–19a Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24
 Romans 8:12–25 Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

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Genesis 28:16-17

“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Does the story of Jacob, sleeping in the open with a stone for his pillow, sound a bit far fetched?

How easy do you find it to get to sleep? Could you sleep with a stone for a pillow?

Let me suggest you could, if you were tired enough.

When you are really tired you can sleep in almost any situation.

I don’t think the story of Jacob is at all far fetched.

Jacob was not a particularly nice guy.

He was a cheat. He cheated his father, his twin [twice] and his father in law.

Jacob was on the run from the anger of his twin brother Esau whom Jacob had scammed – twice.

He would have been moving fast, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the anger of his brother.

He did not stop running until sunset.

There in a rocky place he rested his head on a stone and fell asleep.

Every Sunday School child knows what followed:

- the vivid dream with a ladder stretching between earth and heaven; and God speaking to Jacob, promising to be with him always, and that one day he would return home.

When he woke up, Jacob looked around at the rocky place and exclaimed:

“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

He called that place **Bethel**, from the Hebrew - **baith**=house, **el**=God.

He promised that he would be true to God, and give a tenth of any possessions he acquired to him.

Two things strike me about this story.

The first is that **God loves even despicable cheats like Jacob.**

After a bad start to his life, Jacob was followed by God and given a new start.

Jacob - who had been a cheat, went on to become one of the great legends of the Jewish people.

That reminds me of the Gospel reading today.

That parable of Jesus concerning an enemy who sowed weed seed in a good crop, where it sprouted among the wheat.

The workers asked to be allowed to go and pull out the weeds.

The owner said **NO**: *you will root up some good wheat as well. Let it be until harvest. Then the wheat can be saved and the weeds stacked up and burned.*

In the wheat fields we call the church, when we see the weeds, the teachings we reckon are not right, the people we find doctrinally and morally offensive, we want to rush in and get rid of them.

Sometimes we may not even get it right; we may not be able to see the difference between good growth and bad growth.

But we think we do. We get self righteous about it.

Clean up the church! Get rid of the heretics and sinners! Rip them out!

Jacob seemed like a **weed**, an embarrassment to his grandparents, Sarah and Abraham.

Wouldn't it have been better for God to let the young rogue just disappear on his flight from Esau?

No way!

That's not how God sees us; we are given the chance to make a new start.

Jacob is granted the vision at Bethel, receives the promise of God's Presence with him, and he makes his vows to God.

The parable of Jesus tells us to wait until the harvest.

Then what is wheat and what is weed will be clearly seen.

The owner will know the right time.

He knows what is truly wheat and what is truly weed.

Then the weeds can be destroyed.

But,
BRUCE PREWER ASKS THE QUESTION:
Do you know what I reckon?

I suspect that at the harvest I will get a big surprise as to which, in fact, are the weeds and which is the true wheat.

How about you?

RICHARD FAIRCHILD PUTS IT THIS WAY:

Consider **Moses** - a murderer,
Consider **David** - an adulterer,
Consider the disciple **Peter** - a hypocrite and a coward,
Consider the Apostle **Paul** - a religious vigilante,

Who would think that God would work with them?
that God would be present with them?
that God would love them?
that God would make them great?
that God would grant unto them the blessings of his kingdom?
Consider yourselves.... What judgement do you make upon yourself?

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The second thing that I delight in from the story of Jacob is that **God came to him in a most unlikely situation: a rocky place.**

In later times, the prophet Isaiah would see the glory of God in the golden temple at Jerusalem.

Not so with Jacob. This was no ornate temple,

- no chapel or meeting hall,
- no lofty cathedral of exquisite beauty,
- no evangelical meeting with emotional choir singing and ecstatic preaching,
- no parish church with beautiful liturgy.

Beth-el was an unpromising place for a divine revelation; plenty of stones lying around; not much else.

That night, as the fugitive dropped his exhausted body to the ground, Jacob would have thought that the God of his people was far away.

Yet Jacob found it to be a place where God was very close to him; he called this open place “*the house of God*”

“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

As much as we appreciate beautiful buildings set aside to the glory of God, do not let us ever imagine that these are the only “*houses of God.*”

There will be rocky times in your life, when you seem to be on your own (like Jacob) and you may imagine that God has deserted you, but that will not be true.

There will be unfortunate times in your life when you (like Jacob) have acted badly towards others, and suspect that God might want nothing to do with you.

But that will not be true.

God will be there in the rocky place. God will be with you in your shame.

The commitment of God is **total**.

Jacob's God – our God - is a covenant God who remains faithful to His promise to be there for us.

God is present in every place and situation.

Sometimes you may be aware of the holy Presence.

But most often you will have no such awareness.

Don't be mislead by your feelings.

Feelings are treacherous things, and totally unreliable as a barometer of God's Presence.

Jesus the living Word of God promises to be with us always, and where Christ is, there is God.

That is a covenant we can rely on.

No matter how hard the territory you are in, no matter how alone you feel, not matter how much anguish or grief you suffer:

"Surely the Lord is in this place; though I did not know it."

I am also alerted to the truth that God will be present in others, even with those we may not like: those who discomfort us, irritate us, or appear to be unreligious.

Rocky times, rocky situations, rocky people, are no barrier to God.

Listen to what your opponents say:

somewhere within their words there may be a word from God.

BRUCE PREWER MAKES A CONFESSION:

One part of me wishes it were not so.

It would be much easier if irksome people were scrubbed off God's visiting list, enabling me to not care about their opinions.

It would be more comfortable to divide people into separate camps of "*nice people and nasty people*", with a clear line down the middle.

Then we would only have to take the nice people seriously and listen to them carefully, while consigning the opinions of that other rough mob to the trash can.

But it is not like that.

God loves every person, is present with all, and is capable of speaking to us from any one.

Moreover - which camp would I be in?

There is enough of sneaky Jacob in me to suggest that it would by no means certain that I would be patted on the head and consigned to the “nice people” camp!

And which do you reckon you would find yourself in?

Thank heaven that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways.

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Rocky places, rocky predicaments, rocky people.

Without experiencing a dream like Jacob, we can take it from Jesus that wherever we are:
“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Think about it. Think about it - with faith.

Think about it when you are being hassled at work.

Think about it if you are lying on a bed in hospital.

Think about it when you feel depressed and useless.

Think about it if you become bored in church.

Think about it when you are feeling badly let down by a friend.

Think about it if you are being verbally attacked.

Think about it when others prosper while you battle on.

Think about it if your whole world seems to be falling apart.

Think about it when you feel stretched to the limit of your endurance.

God is found among these rocks.

“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND SPIRIT...AMEN

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 - comment

"We tend to assume that we are the favorites, we are the *"chosen ones."*

But the plain truth of Scripture is that in God's sight all people are loved and valued.

In God's realm, all people are God's children."

STEWARDSHIP THOUGHT *John Stott (1921 -) Anglican clergyman*

We should travel light and live simply.

Our enemy is not possessions, but excess.

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 139)

All-knowing God,

We gather together with praise and thanksgiving for who You are, and for all that You have done for us.

You know us better than we know ourselves—all our thoughts and actions—

and yet You love us.

No matter where we go or what we do, Your love encircles us—ahead and behind— gently leading and guiding and blessing.

We praise You for Your love and Your faithful presence in our lives.

May Your Spirit move in our hearts and minds as we worship together—

examine our attitudes and actions, lay bare the things we need to confess,

challenge us with Your Word, and guide us on to paths that lead to life.

For we are Your people, called by Your name. **Amen.**

ASSURANCE

Dear friends, remember that God is slow to be angry and quick to forgive;

kind and gracious to all.

Know that your sins are forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ,

and forgive those who have sinned against you as he taught us.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God who is full of kindness and love, hear our prayers for the world, for one another, and for ourselves:

For this congregation and for the church around the world: that we may be faithful and courageous in the face of all challenges that arise day by day;

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For mercy, justice, understanding, and peace in relationships between nations: that in this time of anxiety about the future there will still be generosity for all in need.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For those who work in fields and forests, in mines and offices, in hospitals, schools and shops; and for those who cannot find work: that as the economy is reorganized, all who do work will be fairly treated and those seeking work will not lose hope.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For those who travel by land, air and on water, and for those on vacation taking time to explore your creation: that as we recover from the pandemic we will remember to cherish the earth and treat it wisely.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For those who are teachers and students, for schools, colleges, and universities, who plan for a new season of learning in challenging times: that creativity and commitment will lead to discoveries about the world you love and the truth rooted in your wisdom.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For all those in danger and need: for the sick and the dying, the poor and the oppressed, for those standing up against injustice, and for all still at risk from COVID-19.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

For those who are closest to us, for friendships that have stood the test of many years, and for those who love us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves: that they may know our love and appreciation.

Lord, have mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

Hear now the words that Jesus taught us, summing up our spoken and unspoken prayers this day:

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction (based on Romans 8:18-25)

As you go from here into the week ahead,
with whatever joys and challenges it holds,
do not be discouraged or disheartened.

Remember the glory that awaits you as a child of God.
Hold on to that truth; live in that hope.

May the peace of God,
the blessing of Jesus Christ,
and the presence of the Holy Spirit
be with you and among you.

Amen.