

Acid Tests and Altar Calls
Genesis 28:10 – 22
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
July 31, 2016

Where are you?

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran.

How Good Are You? Imagine a continuum of existence: heaven, holiness, God at the top; Hell, evil and Satan at the bottom. Where would you put yourself on that continuum? Where would you place yourself in the moral universe? Who might be an illustration of someone near the top? Or someone near the bottom. Some might place Mother Theresa (now Saint Theresa) near the top. Hers was an exemplary life. Nearly everyone in today's world would place Adolph Hitler near the bottom.

The good news is that where you are on that continuum really does not matter. St. Augustine was the first to note that it is not where you are that matters, but which direction are you heading? Are you heading up, towards God; or heading down, towards destruction? Taking this insight a step further, C.S. Lewis suggested that in eternity, those in Heaven will see heaven as having begun on earth; and conversely, those in hell will see hell as having begun on earth. Thus the question: In which direction are you heading? Are you going up? Getting better? Growing in the Lord. Are you improving in your life and life's relationships? Or are you going down? Destroying yourself and those you love; becoming more self-centered, self-focused, and selfish?

What direction are you heading?

¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that 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 to sleep.

That said, the story of Jacob is encouraging for us for his is the story of a lifelong odyssey. Jacob is not naturally, easily or automatically a man of faith. The goal of Christian parenting is to raise our children to know and love Jesus. In a perfect world, we want our children to grow up always knowing and being faithful in following Christ. That is the hope and prayer in the baptismal promises we make on behalf of our children. But it does not follow that our children easily or seamlessly enter into honorable, *faithful*, adulthood. They may wander. They may not embrace the faith that we as parents seek to pass on to them. But, the story of Jacob gives us hope.

Jacob's life story is an odyssey. It takes Jacob a very long time to come to the point of believing faith in God. It happens slowly, over time. He teaches us the important truth that the story is not over till it is over. Jacob, at this point in the story, is about seventy-seven years old. He is not yet married. His father Isaac sends him back to the family home country, Haran, to find a wife. It is important that the Patriarch's wives be their spiritual equals. They must not marry a woman from the pagan peoples who reside in Canaan. But note the surprising contrast in Jacob's story verses to that of his father, Isaac. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was also from Haran. Isaac's father, Abraham, sent his

servant to Haran, loaded with servants, gifts and wealth, in order to find a suitable wife for Isaac. The servant, like his master Abraham, approaches the task of finding a wife for Isaac with grave seriousness. He has a strategy. He prays. He is deliberate in pursuing his goal. God answers his prayers and he returns with the remarkable Rebekah. In contrast, Jacob goes to Haran on his own. He goes empty handed. He will have to manage on his own. Jacob is self-reliant and clever, a man of wits. But he is a man on his own. A man alone.

Jacob is alone. It is at night. He is in the wilderness. No doubt he feels his vulnerability. In this, Jacob is a model for many of us. It is when we feel vulnerable; when we know our needfulness; that we are most open to realizing, perceiving, the reality of God in our lives. This makes perfect sense. As long as we are confident in our own abilities, we do not think that we need God. We are happy to live our lives on our own, independent, spiritually uncaring. Like Jacob, we prefer to rely on our own wits and efforts.

That said, a key message of Jacob's story is that all men and women need a transformational encounter with God.

All men and women need a transformational encounter with God

¹²And 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! ¹³And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.

Jacob is not a religious man. He must be taught and trained by God. This is his first lesson. He dreams and sees a vision of a ramp between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. Above it all, he sees the Lord God. And he hears the Lord God speak to him, identifying himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac. The vision transforms Jacob's understanding. "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." He begins to discern spiritual realities of life. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Encountering this vision of God moves him in his understanding of faith. Jacob grows. He still has a long way to go, but this is a first step in his walk of faith.

In addition to deepening his understanding, the vision also leads Jacob to change his spiritual commitments. He makes a vow. "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. Some might criticize Jacob for his bargaining, for his conditional response. We rightly expect more. Yet there is no denying that for Jacob this vow represents a significant step forward in his religious and spiritual commitment. You must start somewhere in your spiritual walk. This is where Jacob begins. Jacob encounters God in a vision and this in turn leads him to amend his behavior, change his commitments and adjust his values.

Remember, this is the beginning of Jacob's spiritual walk. There is much more to come in regards to his spiritual story. One of the virtues of reading Christian biographies is that they tell the story of a person's faith over the course of a lifetime. It is a temptation to think that all that matters spiritually is to pray the *sinner's prayer* and be born again. But praying a *sinner's prayer*, turning to Christ in faith the first time, is simply the beginning of the story. The walk of faith *starts* there. Over the course of our lives believers should have multiple moments of profound spiritual transformation. Future encounters with God bring new and deeper understanding in a person's relationship with him.

Until this point, Jacob has been a man for the modern world. He was a decent, godless man. He has been, till now, a man without God. T. S. Elliot described the modern world this way: "And the wind shall say: Here were decent godless people: Their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls." The modern world believes in a closed universe. What we see is all there is. The modern world believes in the seen world, but not the unseen world. The modern world, like Jacob, needs a change in understanding. In his vision Jacob sees a ramp, a stairway to heaven. He sees the angels traversing the path between earth and heaven. The message is clear: there is an unseen world. The earth as we know it is not all there is to existence. God's angels are at work in our world, ascending and descending between the seen and the unseen worlds. And, Jacob sees a vision of the Lord God at the top of the ramp. This tells him, and us, that while the Lord God is remote, he is accessible to man. Communication is possible. God is knowable. God is real. God oversees all.

This is the first step on the pathway of faith: to know that there is a God and that he is knowable, approachable. The second step is to hear God's promises to us.

All men and women need to hear God's promises

The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴Your 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. ¹⁵Behold, 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."

God gives Jacob promises. He promises to give the land where Jacob has rested to Jacob and his offspring. He promises to give Jacob many descendants. God promises to walk with Jacob. And, that he will see these promises through to their fulfilment. This is very significant. Note what God does not do or say. God does not give Jacob duties or requirements. God does not call him to offer sacrifices. It is natural that when men and women begin to think about God, their first thoughts are along the line of "What must I *do* in order to please God?" "What does God require of me?" Yet the biblical message is quite different. Biblical faith does not begin with asking "What does God require of us?" Biblical faith begins with the declaration of what God has done on our behalf. Biblical faith begins with declaring God's promises to us.

This is so much more freeing. Consider Jacob. Until this point in the story, Jacob has not been a man of faith. He has not shown much interest in the God of his father and grandfather. Yet the God of Abraham and Isaac has sought Jacob out. Jacob did not deserve this. He did not earn it. He is not worthy of it. But he hears God's promises to him – not because he – Jacob – deserves to hear them, but simply because God has chosen him. The biblical message begins not with laying expectation and requirements upon us. It begins with hearing the promises God has given to us.

At this point I want to circle back to a point made earlier and expand it a bit: all men and women need to perceive the reality of spiritual truth.

All men and women need to perceive the reality of spiritual truth

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And 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."

Jacob awakes from his dream and he is a changed man. Jacob's awareness and understanding have grown. The place where he had slept has become a place where he met God. He calls it Bethel, the *house of God*. And, Jacob erects an altar: So early in the morning Jacob 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.

In the book of Genesis, it is common that when one of the Patriarchs has a noteworthy spiritual encounter with God, they build an altar to commemorate the event. The altar helps to mark their new understanding of God. When a person encounters God, it is natural to mark the encounter, the new spiritual understanding. A thing is not complete until it has been remembered. Remembering our encounters with God is very important. The great French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, had a dramatic spiritual conversion experience. He wrote notes regarding his experience on a piece of parchment. He then had the parchment sewn into his jacket, so that the memory of the experience was always near his heart.

Jacob too wishes to mark the encounter. He awakes perceiving, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!" Jacob experiences fear and awe. Altars are often built when some new facet of God's character and nature is revealed to us. Remember, until this point Jacob has not been a religious man. Suddenly he realizes "Wow. God is involved in my world." Hitherto he has lived only by his wits. Now he begins to comprehend that God will play a role in the unfolding drama of his life. Jacob begins to grasp that his life will be lived in God's presence.

All men and women need to live in God's presence

¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Jacob calls the place where he first encounters God *Bethel*. *Beth* is the Hebrew word for house. *El* is Hebrew for God. Jacob begins this story at his weakest: alone, at

night, fearful, and asleep in the wilderness. He dreams. He encounters God. For the first time he senses God's presence. In recognizing God's presence Jacob is taking a step in the right direction. He is beginning to learn to live his life in God's presence.

Remember: these are spiritual, unseen realities. Jacob now understands that his life is unfolding in God's presence. However, nothing has changed in regards to the seen world around Jacob. Imagine if there were a security camera focused upon Jacob that evening as he slept, what would it record? We would see only a man sleeping on the ground with a stone pillow. Dreams must be interpreted. The spiritual realities must be explained. Jacob's understanding of God deepens as a consequence of the vision he is given. These explanations are part of the unseen, spiritual world.

There is a scene in the Harry Potter movie, *The Deathly Hallows* (part 2), that helps illustrate this. It is near the end of the story and Harry has made the ultimate sacrifice. He is given a vision. He finds himself in Kings Cross train station. The station is empty, except for his mentor, the late Professor Dumbledore. They talk. As their conversation draws to an end, Harry asks, "Professor, is this real? Or is it just happening inside my head? Dumbledore replies, "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry. Why should that mean that it is not real?"

This leads us to our last point: all men and women need to give concrete expression of their faith in their walk.

All men and women need to give concrete expression of their faith in their walk

²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

As we have said, we believe in the seen and the unseen. The things of faith are, for the most part, unseen realities. But, our beliefs, our faith, the unseen reality within us, must be revealed, expressed concretely. Jacob is given a vision. He sees now how God is at work in his world. And that in turn leads Jacob to take specific steps in his own life. Jacob makes a vow. He erects a pillar. He promises to tithe. Most significantly, he promises that the God of his father Isaac, and grandfather Abraham, will now be his God also: the LORD shall be my God.

In response to this dream, this vision of the world, Jacob makes concrete changes in how he will live his life. The spiritual reality has a practical impact upon Jacob's life. He promises that the LORD shall be my God, and he seeks to find ways to express that faith in his day to day living. This remains the challenge, the expectation, for all people of faith. How do we live out our faith in the world? What practical impact does our faith in Christ have upon how we live our lives? As the epistle of James (1:22) tells us, But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. There must be ways in which our faith practically influences what we do, think, say and how we act.

At this point, we resist the temptation to say that “to be a true Christian you must do this, or do not do that.” Rather, given that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, how does that reality influence our choices and commitments? Jacob said, the LORD shall be my God, and that in turn led him to erect a pillar, to tithe, and to begin to walk with God. How does our confession of faith in Christ lead us to act? The book of Hebrews (10:24 – 25) offers some concrete guidance. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. This is not a laundry list of dos and don’ts. It is more challenging. It asks, “How am I encouraging others to love and good works?” “How does my faith in Christ influence my day to day choices?” How would you answer these questions?

Close

I find it very encouraging that the story of Jacob is in the Bible. Jacob is not a man of easy faith. He schemes. He takes advantage of his brother Esau. Until this point in his story, he was not a man of faith. And, after this point, he is still not much of a man of faith. God is at work. In time Jacob will be brought fully round, but he is not there yet. And I find his story encouraging. What Jacob’s story tells me is that God will meet us where we are. God works with us as men and women, in spite of the fact that we are not the men and women we ought to be.

So as we close this morning, I want Jacob’s example to be encouraging for us. You may be well aware that you are not all that you should be as a man or woman of faith. We are all like that. Follow Jacob’s example. Turn in believing faith to Jesus Christ. Make the commitment that the LORD shall be [your] God. Make the commitment to walk with God and take the next step in your walk of faith. God will meet you in. God will lead you, just as he met and led Jacob so many years ago.

Say “Amen!” Somebody!

Genesis 28:10 – 22

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