

The Gate of Heaven

Genesis 28:10-19a

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today we're looking at one of my favourite characters in the bible: Jacob.

Jacob is the kind of guy that most of us can resonate with because while he has his shining moments of faithfulness and obedience, he's also a bit of a mess, at times.

He's a lot like us, in other words. It's not at all difficult—at least for me—to identify with Jacob

We're entering Jacob's story mid-stream, so perhaps a quick refresher on where we are in the broader narrative is in order.

Way back in Genesis 12, God called Abram out of the land of Harran (present day Syria). God promised to bless Abram with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and that through him he would bless all people.

This blessing of descendants is followed by precisely zero children for Abram and his wife Sarah. Abraham and Sarah are unable to conceive. So, Abraham decides to take matters into his own hands and impregnates his slave-girl Hagar who gives birth to Ishmael.

Finally, when Abram is ninety-nine and Sarah ninety, against all odds Isaac is born. It is a miraculous confirmation of the covenant and the story is back on course.

Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah and they, too, are thought to be unable to conceive until the twins Jacob and Esau arrive on the scene. Jacob famously emerges from the womb hanging onto his brother's heel for dear life and he never really stopped grasping from that point onward.

As an adult, with the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob tricks his blind father into giving him the firstborn's blessing that was due to Esau which, understandably, enrages his brother.

So, Jacob does what any normal person would do to diffuse a family conflict. He arranges for a family meeting where everyone can sit down and air their grievances in a calm, rational manner, using “I feel” statements and take some constructive steps toward reconciliation...

No, that’s not what Jacob does.

What he *in fact* does is run for the hills. Again, with the help of his mother who is understandably a bit panicky at the thought that one of her sons is about to murder the other (it’s less understandable that she doesn’t seem to acknowledge her role the conflict, but we’ll leave that one aside).

Rebekah tells Jacob to get out of Dodge and take refuge in Harran, the very place where Isaac’s grandfather Abram had *left* all those years ago in obedience to the call and promise of God!

“Find yourself a wife, while you’re there,” she says, “because I don’t want you marrying any of the Canaanite women around here.” Isaac nods in agreement.

So, Jacob finds himself wandering north, away from the land of promise and back to where his ancestors came from because his scheming has caught up with him, because his brother wants to kill him, because his parents are micromanaging his love life, and because he’s generally out of options.

Jacob’s story to this point sounds less like a squeaky-clean moralistic bible story than a tawdry soap opera.

(This would remain the case throughout Jacob’s life, as he schemed and swindled and occasionally behaved admirably for the rest of his days).

But this is where we meet Jacob in our text this morning: on the run, camped out in the middle of nowhere with a rock for a pillow and a fairly uncertain future ahead of him.

And in the midst of all these chaotic events, in the midst of all lying and manipulation and favouritism and bad faith—even while travelling in the exact *opposite* direction that the story was supposed to go, back to where his family came from instead of inhabiting the land of promise...

In the midst of all this... God shows up.

God meets Jacob in an ordinary place. God meets Jacob in the middle of all of his sin and stupidity. God meets Jacob while he's travelling in what looks like the wrong direction.

And God insists upon blessing him.

Jacob has a dream where he sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down between the two.

He sees God standing beside him and reaffirming the promise given to his grandfather.

I am the Lord, the God of your ancestors. I will give you this land that you are presently leaving. I will bless your offspring. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you. I am with you. I will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you until my promises have been fulfilled.

Jacob responds with the famous words: "Surely the Lord was in this place and I didn't even know it. This middle of nowhere place is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven.

He names the place Bethel. "Beth," meaning "house"; "el", meaning God (El Shaddai, El-ohim, etc.). House of God.

(Think similar to Bethlehem. "Beth" = house; "lehem" = bread.)

There have been all kinds of interpretations of what the image of the ladder and the angels might symbolize over the years. Some have interpreted it as a picture for the soul's ascent into heaven after death; others have interpreted it as a portrayal of the virtues necessary to attain holiness in this life.

But at the very least, I think we can say that the image of Jacob's ladder suggests a deep connection between the divine and human realm. The divine is always present, even in an ordinary place, even with ordinary people like Jacob, even when we can't see it.

For a moment, the veil is pulled back and Jacob sees what is true at all times. God is present. God is active. God is near.

And even beyond these more general truths, I think we see an even more hopeful one. God descends. And God meets the unqualified.

God doesn't choose Jacob because of any special merits or inherent holiness he possesses. We've already seen that Jacob is a bit of a shady character, even though he has moments of deep goodness and obedience.

But God shows up in unimportant overlooked places and he meets conflicted and ambiguous characters, promising blessing and promising God's own presence for the future.

I don't know about you, but this strikes me as very good news.

How many of us could use the reminder that God meets us "on the way," where we are, even when we've wandered off course?

How many of us would welcome the promise that God's blessing isn't tied to our performance?

How many of us might need this word of hope that even when the future doesn't look immediately clear, that God will not leave us, and that wherever we go God's presence will remain with us?

I'm sure that Jacob could scarcely have imagined that one day he would reconcile with the brother that was currently hunting him down or that God would lead him back to the land of promise or that he would become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. But this is what happened.

How many of us look into the future and are having a hard time seeing anything hopeful? Whatever the situation, whether it's the state of the world in 2020 or a more personal heartache, perhaps this is just the word for you, for us.

Perhaps we need to hear that as the people of God, there is blessing in our future, things that we perhaps cannot even imagine from our present vantage point.

There's another thing I want us to note about this story. It regularly frustrates me that the readings from the lectionary often cut passages off in weird places. This week is no exception.

Here's what comes immediately after:

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

It’s possible that Jacob is saying something like, “in light of all that God has promised, I will obey, and I will be loyal.”

But that word “if” at the beginning of his vow sits awkwardly, doesn’t it? It seems like Jacob may still be hedging his bets.

Even after all that Jacob has experienced of God’s presence, it *sounds* like he’s saying, “Well, this has been awesome. And you know, God, I’m certainly interested in keeping negotiations open going forward. So, I’ll tell you what, if you fulfill your end of the bargain, I’ll be sure to do the same.”

I could be wrong about this. Scholars disagree on this point. But it certainly wouldn’t be out of character, given what we know of the rest of Jacob’s story, before and after this divine encounter at Bethel, wouldn’t it?

And it would fit with how many of us look at our relationship with God, too. For many of us, faith is more like a contract than a relationship.

We regularly bargain with God. God, *if* you’ll do this for me then I will... go to church more, give more, pray more regularly, give more of my time doing charitable work. Whatever.

If you’ll heal me from this disease... if you’ll get me that job... if you’ll rescue my marriage... if you’ll keep my kids safe... If you’ll keep me and my loved ones from getting COVID-19... if you’ll turn around our church’s fortunes... If, if, if.

It’s very easy to slide into the error of treating God as a mechanical vendor of blessings. And our allegiance to God ebbs and flows according to how God happens to be performing for us at any given moment.

This is not a relationship. This is a contract.

And did you notice the absence of the word “if” in what God says to Jacob in the dream? He doesn’t say, “Now Jacob, if you’ll smarten up and stop being such a hustler and turn yourself around get back to where you’re supposed to be, then I’ll get busy blessing you.”

God simply says, “I am your God. I will be with you always. My promise to bless you will not waver.”

Now this is not to say that blessing does not traverse through the land of suffering. It often does.

Jacob’s life would continue to be marked by conflict with relatives, wrestling with God (literally), the rape of his daughter Dinah, the death of his beloved wife Rebekah, and, eventually, the heartache of losing his son Joseph and the joy of finding him again in Egypt.

Blessing does not mean the absence of pain. Jacob knew this. Other figures in Scripture knew it. And, of course, Jacob’s most famous descendant knew it.

I’m speaking, of course, of Jesus. I think even a sermon based on the book of Genesis should talk about Jesus.

In John 1:51, at the end of a passage where Jesus calls his first disciples and where Nathanael is amazed that Jesus knew him and saw him under the fig tree before he even met him, we read these words:

You will see greater things than that... “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

It’s clearly an allusion to Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28.

And it’s equally clear that Jesus is saying something like, “I am now the bridge between heaven and earth. I am the joining together of the divine and the human. I am the final fulfillment of the promise of God way back in Genesis 12. I am the one through whom all will people on earth will be blessed.”

Jesus' path took him through suffering and death. But this was and is the source of blessing for all. And because of his obedience, God exalted him and gave him the name that is above all names (Phil. 2:9).

Jesus models for us a relationship with God that goes through suffering to blessing. But even beyond that, Jesus is himself the reason that we can hold fast to God in the midst of trials.

Jesus is the one in whom and through whom we encounter God must fully and finally. Jesus is, in the truest sense of the word, the "gate of heaven."

These words come from Jacob's expression of praise in Genesis 28:17.

In the ultimate sense, Jesus is where we encounter God must fully.

But the gate of heaven is also anywhere where we encounter God, anywhere where we are reminded of God's faithfulness and God's unwavering promise to bless and to guide us.

The gate of heaven anywhere where we are reminded that we, like Jacob, are "carriers of God's promise."

It doesn't have to be a special place. It can be in a desert with only stones for pillows while we're running away from what we've been called to.

It can be the place where we're uncertain or, worse, where we've made a mess of things and are looking back in regret.

The gate of heaven is anywhere God meets us. And anywhere God reminds us that just like with Jacob, he will not leave us, that his blessing is not conditional.

And if we can remember this—that God is never far from each one of us and that God's promises to bless and guide us are sure—then we might just find ourselves looking back on this or that point in our own journeys and saying, with Jacob, "surely the Lord is in this place (wherever it was or is), and I was not aware of it.

Amen.

