

Who Made the Ladder?

Genesis 28:10-19

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m.

Let us continue in prayer. Wake us up, God. Help us to live in your world, to hear your Word, to be tuned to your presence; for you do not leave us alone. You do not slumber or sleep. Help us attend to you, as you attend to us in Jesus Christ by the power of your spirit. Amen.

Just a little more than 201 years ago on July 11, 1804, two shots rang out on the west side of the Hudson River a few miles north of New York City. All that is there now is an old, reddish brown boulder to commemorate the reality of this very sad, but historic moment. Biographer Ron Chernow talks about the fateful morning that Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr faced each other. Aaron Burr came with a commitment to kill Hamilton; and Hamilton came with a commitment, by the grace of God, not to fire on an enemy. Hamilton was killed, and that historic moment resonates in history as one when God was present in a terrible and difficult way. That walk enshrines the spot where vengeance and forgiveness collided with politics. God's grace was still there.

Jacob was on a journey. He was running away because he was in trouble. He had been politically activated, with his mother's help, to cheat his brother, Esau, out of his birthright and the blessing. Jacob is a manipulator and a politically hostile presence in Esau's life. Esau is very angry: he is looking for an opportunity to kill his brother as soon as his father dies. So Esau looks for a plan to catch his brother by surprise; but his mother knows that and she sends Jacob away. In the guise of looking for a wife, he is really on the run, because he has done evil to his brother Esau. He is on that journey between places. He is coming from a place of terror and fear, and moving to a place that he does not know. And he is asleep in the middle of the night.

This is an ordinary place, but his journey is an ancient journey each one of us will take. It is the journey between our past and our future; we wonder where God is on the way. That journey always leads home if God is there. That journey is always a hard journey, and it is usually based upon some trouble we've experienced, some desolation we've experienced earlier in life, and some hope that something better is in the future. The journey begins with harshness and ends with the hope that God will lead us home.

These past few days we've seen that wonderful, smiling face of Jack Nicklaus as he took that final walk across the links of the oldest golf course in history – the old course at St. Andrews -- to say farewell to all the times that he spent there playing golf. And in one of his interviews, he talked about the end of that journey, and how golf has been a wonderful game to him, but it is still only a game. As he lets go of the game, he is embracing the reality that he is on a journey of life; and at the end of that journey are family and friends, and a beloved place. He knows what is important on the journey.

Jacob discovers that there is no way he can make life work on his own. Jacob has tried every way he knows to be able to manipulate his own inheritance and to do what he has been given to do to make life happen his own way. But Jacob is in a barren place. He has been banished into wilderness. He is in no man's land, with no name and no purpose. He has lost control, and he is running. Jacob can no longer force or coerce what he needs or wants in life.

Steve Jobs, the president and CEO of Apple Computer and Pixar Corporation recently addressed the Stanford class of 2005. He told the story of a moment in his life when he thought he was at the top of the world. He discovered that he had lost everything because the board of Apple had decided, even though he founded the organization, that he needed to go. He was devastated. He saw his life as a public failure. He was tempted to run away. Now, in his own way, he doesn't recognize that God is there present with him, but he does see that, if you connect the dots, there is providential movement in your life if you can see the

benefit of not running away from the hard things that happen. Even though he lost his position and his power, he discovered that in that loss... in that barren place... there was the opportunity for a new life. And he even discovered a wife in the middle of that, as well.

We find ourselves on life's journey in those tough places where we have tried to make things happen and we simply can't. We ultimately come to the place where we know that only God can produce life. We somehow, to the best of our ability, as we work so hard, seem to be able to create messes of our lives. God gives the gifts, and we use them and misuse them and end up in places where we've hurt people, we've manipulated systems, and we've done damage. Let's face it; you and I cannot create life, we cannot coerce it, we cannot command it or control it; we cannot connive it or conspire it, or contrive it. Only God brings life.

Jacob finally had to face the fact that his family was quite dysfunctional. He, himself, was a person of great sin. He was enmeshed with his mother and estranged from his father. He had created an enemy of his brother. Only God – and this is repeated several times in this text and repeated all through the Pentateuch books of Moses – only God can straighten out the messes we make in life. Without God we will create disasters.

God meets Jacob in a particular place; the place has no meaning other than that God is there. God meets him in a particular dream; and the dream would have no meaning, except that God is there. God meets him and shows him a ramp that moves from heaven to earth and back again. That ramp would not exist except that God creates it. God shows that human beings can't be the ones to make it to heaven and reveals that angels are the ones who go back and forth in the traffic between heaven and earth. God can even turn a rock – a simple, hard little rock that Jacob sleeps on – into a monument of celebration. Only God can provide. God is the one who makes the ladder. Jacob has been working hard to try to find a way to create it, but it doesn't work that way. You can work in every possible way you can imagine, with all your giftedness and abilities, with all the people you can accumulate, and the power that you can muster... and you cannot make life the way you want it. That certain place can be any place, at any time: that is where God shows up. It is that place where we have lost all of our options, and God shows up. It's that place where we are exiled and alienated, lost and alone – and God shows up. It's the place where we feel absence, isolation, and loneliness; and God shows up.

God shows up in a dream here. Now, dreams are very interesting things in biblical history. Dreams are fascinating things to look at today in more secular, modern and post-modern history. The scriptures are clear that dreams are often the place where God speaks. Why is that? Because dreams are seen as the place where human beings are no longer trying to control and manipulate the way things should be according to our agenda. Dreams are the places where we are finally at ease and allow messages to break in upon us that we have resisted or blocked out. God speaks in dreams. In the dream, God uncovers the deepest desires. God sneaks in and speaks to a person who has been robustly resistant. God is in control of Jacob's mind, and Jacob is allowing, and subconsciously receiving, what God has to say to him.

Now, today there are some interesting tensions around dreams. There are some Christians today who warn you not to believe in dreams, not to pay attention to dreams. Dreams are satanic; they're evil. You can't trust a dream. There are some who believe that this post-modern interest in mysticism and the paranormal is a bad thing. You can only trust objective truth, scripture. God doesn't speak in dreams any more. I don't agree with that. I think God speaks in dreams, and we aren't listening most of the time. God does not speak in opposition to scripture or Jesus. Rather God often was trying to communicate with us in our subconscious in ways that, if we would just stop and listen, we would be able to understand.

Jacob got it. Are we afraid of dreams today? Some people are. Some people consider the dream to be a place where you have lost control and lost rationality and lost your mind. Watch out – the devil will get you there. I think it is where God might speak. And we should be paying more attention. God speaks in dreams in the Old Testament and the New Testament. God speaks in dreams here. The dream is the place where we are not in control: God is.

Another symbol of God's presence and control here is that ladder. What do we do with the ladder? (I understand the newspaper has the ladder in the sermon title spelled as "latter." They didn't know what to

do with the ladder, either.) The image is, more possibly, not a ladder, but a ramp. There is a wonderful contrasting image in the book of Genesis early on, about a ramp. You see, in those old Mesopotamian periods of time, human beings tried to reach heaven by building towers, and ramps that circled those towers up to heaven. It was referred to as the “Tower of Babel” in the Old Testament. It was the human attempt to reach God. Genesis 11 says, “Let us make for ourselves a tower that reaches into heaven, and a name for ourselves.” And it says that the human beings made bricks to build a tower.

That’s not what God does. God doesn’t build towers. God lets down the ramps. We try to make ways to heaven, and we can’t. Attempts to reach God on our own terms are coming out in boutique spiritualities today – where there is the view that each and every individual can create their own religion. If you can just design your own way to heaven, you’re okay. It can’t be done. Attempts to reach God come out in positions of power: if you can just reach a high enough place and have enough control, you can make things happen your way. It can’t be done. Or... you can make a name for yourself if you become popular and visible, and the media catches you and drives you to a highly visible place – then you can make things happen. It can’t be done. Or, attempts to reach God come out in the heroic actions of people who do wonderful things, almost god-like and titanic; that’s not where God is. We know the song that Frank Sinatra made popular, “I Did it My Way.” It’s almost like the national anthem of the rugged individualist.

But that’s not where God shows up; because we can’t make it happen. We can’t do it our way. We can’t get to heaven our way.

I was in Dallas during the mid-eighties. There was a lot of evidence that the architects and builders were trying to reach heaven in their own way. We noticed that each individual building was a little taller than the one before it. One got the feeling that each builder was saying, “Mine is bigger than yours.” And finally, the last builder just decided to put an end to the whole conversation by putting the numbers right on the building, in terms of the number of stories in height. You could read them from a distance. We have all sorts of ways of trying to prove that we can reach heaven.

God also points out that heaven is not the place where human beings come and go. That ladder is not being trafficked by men and women who are going up and down to heaven; it is being trafficked by angels: God’s messengers. Only God can send the communications back and forth. We can’t go unless God invites us. God is at work. As Jesus said in his prayer, “The kingdom of heaven will come to earth.” Jesus prayed for that. But it has to be God’s initiative for that to happen. We can’t make it happen.

Finally, in the experience of Jacob, it is the Lord who appears in the middle of the dream. It is the final affirmation that this dream is not about what Jacob can do, but that this dream is totally about what God does. God is the God of his fathers; the God who gives the land; the God who promises; the God who multiplies; the God who brings fruitfulness and barrenness; the God who will accompany him and provide for him; the God who will finally bring him home on the journey. God will do it all. Jacob is getting the message loud and clear. And, as if to affirm this, when he wakes up, he takes that little rock that he is sleeping on – this ordinary rock.

Who makes rocks? We don’t. God makes rocks. Even Jacob realizes that God makes the rock, and that the rock is a symbol of God’s presence, and he should make a shrine out of the rock. This is a period of time when human beings are making bricks and creating huge shrines of their own agendas. But God is not in the bricks. God is only in the rock. God is with us. We celebrate that by reflecting on those moments when God has shown up, has spoken to us, and intervened for us when we have made a mess out of our lives. And all we need is some little symbol that God has been there, on God’s own initiative. God makes the rock. God is the rock of our salvation.

If you go to the National Cathedral, you will see one of those wonderful stained glass windows where there is a moon rock right in the middle of the window. It is as if to say that this whole majestic cathedral, constructed by human hands, means relatively nothing compared to the power of God who made the rock from the moon. That realization causes Jacob to worship – to turn Jacob into one who realizes that rocks count.

I was hiking with a couple of my friends in the Santa Susanna Mountains in southern California when I

was a teenager. And like teenagers, we were taking some risks. We were jumping across rocks and going across caverns. I slipped and fell about 15 feet off one large rock. I landed between two rocks jutting up like spikes. If I had landed a couple of inches to the right or to the left, I probably would have broken several bones or injured some internal organs. But I landed between the rocks, in a nice soft patch of grass. It felt kind of warm and cozy. It dawned on me right then and there that God was in this place. I could have been hurt or killed.

Remember those times when God shows up because those rocks, moments, and places – those ladders that come from heaven – are to remind you that you cannot do it on your own. Only God can do it through you. Jacob's response is very clear. "God is here. I cannot do it on my own and make my own life happen. Only God will give life as a gift." His entire pattern of life changes as he commits himself to walk with the living God. That's the point of Jacob's life – to catch your attention and to encourage you to stop trying to manipulate life and do it on your own agenda – to recognize that God is here, that God is in charge, and if you stop and listen, God will lead you into life with abundance that is a gift.

Jacob is so moved by his sense that God has given him all the gifts of his life that he makes a radical decision. He decides, because all these good gifts have come from God, that he will give back to God a tenth of everything given to him. The whole concept of Old Testament tithing and generosity comes out of Jacob's experience that God gives everything. We think we make money on our own. We think we make it because we are so smart, and we're so accomplished and so successful. But it's not true. Every cent comes from God. God simply wants an act of generosity from us, recognizing that we can't make it on our own.

If you are here today, and you are in a hard place: you are in a place of barrenness or desolation or desperation; you are in a place where you have been trying very hard to make it on your own – this is a message of good news for you. God is here. God is speaking to you. The word of God is calling you to a relationship that is personal and intimate. Listen. Jesus Christ in the Spirit is speaking to you that you might be willing to lay your life down to walk with God. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, help us tune in to the power of your Word now spoken in scripture, to allow your dreams to take over our dreams, to allow your power to run our lives. Meet us here on the journey so that we might receive the ramp that you have built and start walking toward heaven. May the grace, mercy, and love of Jesus lead us in that direction. Amen.