

The Gate of Heaven

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As we prepare for Holy Communion for the first time in months, I was very much drawn to that first lesson for today about Jacob as his famous dream. You are all familiar with the details of that dream, but I wonder if you are as familiar with the situation in which it occurred. I want to talk about that for a bit.

Jacob was one who had spent much of his life up to this moment struggling with just about everything he encountered. He even struggled with his twin brother Esau in the womb, according to Genesis 25 (v.22). And when it came time for them to be born, Esau, the hairy one, came out as the firstborn. But Jacob, the smooth one, had his little fist wrapped tightly around his brother's heel, as if to say, "He may have been first, but I'm not going to let him get anything over me!" (v.24-26).

Just so the struggle continued throughout their childhood, until one day, in their youth, Esau comes in from hunting and tells his brother that he is famished. Jacob sees an opportunity. He's cooking up a big stew, and he sees it as an opportunity. So he says to his brother, "I'll give you your fill of this stew and more if you first sell me your birthright." Esau is young, thought, "What use is a birthright when you're famished." So he agreed to the deal. (v.29-34).

Sometime later, when they are about middle-aged, their father Isaac is old and blind and making ready to die. Isaac tells Esau, who was always his favorite, "Go out hunting and prepare for me a great feast from your hunt so that I may give you my blessing before I die."

Well Jacob gets wind of this through his mother Rebekkah, and the two of them hatch a scheme to get Isaac's blessing before Esau even gets back from the hunt. Jacob grabs a couple goat kids from the family herd and slaughters them to make the feast. Then he takes the goat skins to wrap around his arms and body to mimic his brother's hairy body. Then he goes to his blind father pretending to be Esau. And sure enough, Jacob manages to lie his way through that meal and convince Isaac that he is his brother and secures Isaac's paternal blessing.

This was no small prize, let me tell you. Because when Isaac dies, that would mean that the position of head of the clan would go to Jacob – which means that Esau and his family would have to serve Jacob.

Well, when Esau found out what happened, he was fit to be tied. So much so that he had murder on his mind. So Jacob packs up and high-tails it out of there (Gen.27).

That's the story leading up to Jacob's dream as we have it in Genesis 28. Jacob is on the run. He has left his home and his family behind in Beer-Sheba in the southern part of modern Israel, and is on his way to Haran in the north, which is where his mother's brother lives and which he calculates to be a safe place until his brother's anger cools off.

It's going to be a long journey for this middle-aged struggler of a man. About the distance from Tampa to Chattanooga. Walking. Maybe occasionally riding on a pack animal, like a mule. It's going to take months.

And it's not going to be a peaceful, happy journey. No, it's a journey while Jacob is in turmoil. He's old enough to know who he is and how his life had gone. And he is in turmoil and anxious about his future.

In the midst of this high anxiety, struggling situation, Jacob stops to rest and falls asleep out under the stars. That's when this incredible dream came on. In that dream, Jacob sees something of a ladder or stairway, if you will, running between the earth below and heaven above. Not unlike that artist's rendition on the front page of our bulletin, I suppose, in which the clouds form something of a stairway. And on that stairway, there were angels – those holy messengers and guardians of God – going up and down – getting their messages and instructions from God in heaven, and then coming down to do their duty and bring God's word of love and guidance and protection to those who need it here below. It was something to behold, even in a dream.

Then suddenly, there was God, standing right beside Jacob as he watches those angels ascending and descending in that dream. And God says to Jacob, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your [grand]father and the God of Isaac [your father].... Know that 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."

What a dream! What a blessing! What a promise!

Jacob awoke and knew that the place where he had been sleeping was holy ground. He knew that he stood at the "gate of heaven." And he knew that God was walking with him through his life, including through the struggles. Just as he promised. And Jacob knew that he was blessed.

That won't be the end of the struggles for Jacob. He will even wrestle with the angel of God by the Jabbok River on his return home, according to Genesis 32 (22-32). But from the point of this dream forward, Jacob will be more circumspect, and he will never forget that he is blessed.

We, like Jacob, have been on a journey ourselves. It's already been months since we started. It's going to be months more before this Covid

journey is complete. And we and so many around us are struggling and in turmoil. We may not have been as complicit as Jacob in creating his own problems, but we've been struggling nonetheless. Our journey hasn't been a peaceful journey. Nor does the road ahead of us look peaceful either. And so we, like Jacob, are anxious about our future.

Well it's time to rest. It's time to take our rest in the Lord, as Jacob did. It's time to go to the place where we know we can find "the gate of heaven." It isn't a place as such. But it is something that is delivered to us by those same angels ascending and descending that stairway to heaven.

It's the word of promise that our Lord Jesus Christ once spoke in an upper room. He speaks them to us in living and present words each time we remember that night in which he was betrayed. It's the word of promise, "Given for you. Shed for you. For the forgiveness of sins." It's the Body and Blood of Christ come near. And even taken into us.

And by this encounter in the bread and wine, we will all be standing on holy ground, wherever we are. We will know that we stand at the gate of heaven. And we will know that God is walking with us throughout our lives. Just as he promised. And we, like Jacob, will know that we are blessed.

That won't be the end of our struggles any more than it was for Jacob. As I said before, this journey that we are on will continue for many months more. But with the weekly reminder in word and sacrament, we can be more circumspect. And through it, we will always know that we are blessed.