

State College Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Charles Curley

Children of Promise 4

“And he dreamed that 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!”

Genesis 28:12

Genesis 28:10-22

We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
Soldiers of the cross.

Every rung goes higher, higher,
Soldiers of the cross.

Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Soldiers of the cross.

If you love Him, why not serve Him?
Soldiers of the cross.

We are climbing higher, higher.
Soldiers of the cross.

Is this song biblical?

In the Bible, who climbed the ladder?

Angels.

Isn't that curious.

A Bible story about angels, transformed into a song about **we** are climbing.

The church in America has suffered some major splits, divisions over who climbs Jacob's ladder.

Of course it isn't phrased that way.

Theologically the question is, how transcendent or how imminent is God?

Do we reach up to God?

Or does God come down to us?

Is God alone responsible for our salvation?

Coming down to save us?

Or do we work for our own salvation?

Climbing up to find God?

Traditional Calvinists would say God alone is responsible for our salvation. God saves whom God saves, and we have nothing to do with it at all.

They called it Predestination.

Genesis called it God sending his angels up and down the ladder.

Others, represented traditionally by Wesleyans and Baptists, and today by most most American Christians, believes that God builds the ladder which connects heaven and earth – but then expects us to climb!

We are climbing Jacob's ladder.

If the theology seems a little far away from you let's phrase it a different way.

It's trying to express to different ways of experiencing God.

It's the difference between summer and fall in my garden.

Summer is a time of major effort.

If I lose control of my garden then, it is gone for good.

Why do weeds seem to grow faster than vegetables or flowers?

For sure, God gives the growth. But if I don't keep after it – watering, fertilizing, weeding – I won't get the harvest I want.

It takes a lot of effort.

But in the fall. There is not a thing I can do in the fall to keep the garden growing when cold weather comes around.

It is a shutting down time. A receiving with gratitude time. A time that puts all human effort into perspective with winter's inexorable approach.

Fall is a time when we are reminded of the power outside us, it reminds us that the seasons happen to us.

We don't invite the change. It just comes.

The difference between the Bible and the song is the difference between fall and summer.

It concerns God initiating and our response.

This morning I would like to look at the story of Jacob's ladder again, see what it originally meant before we too quickly tried to apply it to ourselves.

I also want to take a look at how it was used 1000 years ago by some Jews in Babylon then, finally, what it means now.

Jacob is one of the better-known characters in the Old Testament.

He wrestled with an angel in the night.

Probably the most famous story of Jacob is how he cheated his older brother Esau.

He remember that story?

Esau was a hairy man. Hair all over his body.

Jacob put lamb skins on his arms to fool his old blind father Isaac.

The father touched the hairy arms, thought it was Esau, and blessed Jacob with the blessing Esau should have received.

Jacob stole Esau's blessing right away from him.

Tells us what kind of a man Jacob was.

It was right after Jacob cheated his older brother that this story takes place.

You have to look at a map to catch what's happening.

It sounds benign enough, Jacob set out from there and then went on his way towards Haran.

Put more succinctly, Jacob was running from the southern part of present-day Israel to Turkey.

He was strongly motivated to get as far north as possible.

Esau and his tribe of followers were after him.

Jacob was a refugee, on the run.

He had left his home, left his land.

He was fleeing toward the hometown of his grandfather Abraham.

But God had told Abraham to leave Haran.

God promised Abraham and his descendents the land Jacob just left behind.

What would happen to Jacob?

Jacob, the rascal, the refugee, was running for his life.

He was cut off from the land, from his worship, his family, from God.

Now do you see, when Jacob thought all was totally lost, God came to him **down** the ladder.

Not only came to him, but promised to be with Jacob where ever he happened to be.

Promised to lead him back home again, promised to change his infamous cheating name into a name up blessing.

Promised Jacob would worship in the land again.

All those promises were **initiated** by God.

Jacob did not have to do a thing.

But Jacob did respond.

Didn't have to respond to the promise, but he did.

Jacob's response was to make a vow.

"If God will be with me," (God has already promised to be with Jacob so it should read "since God will be with me") "since God will be with me,

since God will protect me on my journey and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, and when I come back safely to my father's house, then the Lord shall be my God, and the stone which I have set up as a sacred pillar shall be a house of God.”

And he set up a stone and called that place Beth-el, the “House of God.”

Since God had already initiated his care for Jacob, since God had initiated the promises to Jacob, Jacob responded by promising to worship God forever.

About 1000 years after Jacob had seen his vision, the people of Jacob, of his family, his descendents, were taken into captivity, in Babylon.

They saw themselves as Jacob.

The reason the people of Jacob, later called Israel, were exiles in the land of Babylon was because they were rascals, just like their namesake.

They hadn't followed God.

They had suffered moral decay.

They were greedy and selfish, cheating and stealing from their own people.

They had followed bad kings.

There was no longer true worship of God, a Beth-el or anyplace else.

Can imagine how important the story of Jacob and his ladder became to them.

Jacob had no redeeming qualities to help him climb up that ladder to God.

Neither did they.

But Jacob did not have to climb.

God came down to Jacob.

Came down with a promise.

God promised Jacob he would return to the land.

He would return to worship God.

His name of bad repute would become in him a blessing.

Oh how the exiles in Babylon hoped the same would be true for them.

For these exiled people, with no hope of redemption by their own deserving, with no hope of salvation by their own efforts, Jacob's ladder was more than a whimsical story of angels ascending and descending.

It is a dramatic and powerful way to proclaim that God is present for his people. God will protect his people.

God will protect and lead them home.

All initiated by God.

No ladder to climb!

You can understand its importance.

The story in Genesis of Jacob's ladder is the forerunner to the Christ story.

On God's initiative, God sent Jesus.

We did not a thing to deserve God sending Jesus to us.

Jesus came down for the exiles, for the rascals.

In the New Testament known as sinners.

Is anyone exempt from that name?

On God's initiative, Jesus was sent for those who were running for their lives, for those who are rebellious, without resources.

Is anyone of us exempt?

Jesus came down Jacob's ladder to us, and now it is time for us to decide how we will respond.

Since God is with us, since God protects us on our journeys, since God brings us safely back to our father's house, shall then the Lord be our God.

With all that involves.

Though it be a change in our life and our living.

The challenge is not to climb up the ladder to God.

The challenge is to live in response to Christ, who climbed down Jacob's ladder to us!

Which is the greater challenge?

I think it is the second one.

To live for him who came for us.

Amen