

J is for Journey: Jackpot

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Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway^[a] resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

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 house, 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."

This is the word of God for the people of God; Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let's go to the Lord in Prayer:

Last week we spoke about Jacob and Esau and how Jacob's story of being a trickster was our story as well. We talked about how we might inadvertently or willfully, give up our God given birthright as children of God. We talked about how Jacob snatched his brother's Esau, birthright through trickery and Esau's impulsiveness. We also mentioned how we can be ones who steal and minimize others God given birthrights as children of God. We can do that by using ugly epithets, through arrogance, racial comments, gender comments, and by down playing the sacred worth of any of God's people.

Today we talk about Jacob again. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. The son of Rebekah and Isaac. The brother of Esau. We pick up the story this morning in chapter 28 of Genesis and our Jacob is on the run. He has vacated the premises. He split, he lit out, and he skedaddled for Haran from Beersheba. Why? Because his brother Esau who had lost his birthright and paternal blessing through trickery, is out to get his little brother.

J is for Journey: Jackpot. What the heck is a jackpot? It is a fat daddy payday that is unexpected. A jackpot is like when the well you are drilling comes in flowing 100 barrels of oil a day. A jackpot might be if you receive an unexpected winning, like at the race track. A jackpot could be landing a great job with a good salary, stability and continued employment with great benefits. A jackpot could be marrying your wonderful husband or wife, or having great kids.

A jackpot is a good thing. It's not bad. In the text today Jacob hits the jackpot in verse 156 of genesis 28. "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Jackpot, plain and simple.

God has spoken words of promise here. And God is NOT a liar. I am with you. I will watch over you. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you. I will not leave you. Words of assurance, words of faith, words of promise, words of covenant.

That is a jackpot from the creator God.

However it is of note that a man in New York won a \$50 million dollar jackpot. And until he could get his financial needs in order, he hid his lottery ticket. And he couldn't remember where it was. It expired after 180 days, and the man lost out. 10 years later he finds the ticket. The point being that he had the jackpot but through his own foolishness, he lived without the blessing, something that he was entitled to for a long time. And how like Jacob that could be, and how like us, that can be as well.



It is interesting for us to note a few things about this scripture passage and our friend Jacob. Typically folks hone in on the ladder event. Well, let's clarify. In the Mesopotamian era, the builders there built ziggurats. (see picture to the left of ziggurat) and the more accurate translation from the Hebrew is not ladder, but the word "ramp". You see this is a big deal with God saying I will not leave you. Typically people in this period of time understood that a God lived in a certain location and had power only in a limited area. Yet here is the Creator of all, saying, I

will be with you always and ...everywhere. The place of the dream is at a place name Luz. Yet Jacob renames it as Beth, meaning "house"; El- meaning "of God."Bethel-House of God.

He consecrates the rock and place where he dreamed, with olive oil and names it and claims it as a place of holy worship. Jacob is recognizing God and his power.

The place is actually less important than the realization that Jacob is in the presence of the creator God.

I want you people who have left home on your own to reflect back on that event. Do you remember that? Maybe you went off to college in some different locale. Maybe you were drafted, or enlisted in the armed forces. Maybe you married and moved to take anew job. There is anticipation and excitement, some fear and trepidation as to what you will find. Got any college freshmen here? Perhaps they have a bit of anxiety about the new journey they are on.

This text has no interaction between Jacob and anyone else. Just God and Jacob. We see Jacob as a vulnerable person. Fleeing a bad brother situation. Sleeping alone out into the open on a rock, and being vulnerable. And God comes to him in his vulnerable state in a dream. Jacob is not amazed that God appears, he is amazed that IT IS God. God is present, in this place. Just like with us right now. Just like when we partake of the communion meal, like today. God is present at the table with us.

The ladder is like a highway allowing traffic from heaven to earth. Very much like Jesus as our mediator, who stands between God the father and humankind on earth. God's messengers who are angelic beings are moving up and down this celestial highway. And Jacob realizes that heaven has to do with earth.

What would that revelation do to you? What happens when your eyes are opened to a new reality and new possibility? Like when you fell in love. When you committed your life to Christ. When you see potential in a situation that has thwarted you for a long time. Jacob no longer sees himself as a fearful, isolated, guilt laden, lonesome person just living to survive. Now he is a person living in a place of possibility. This directly reflects John 1:51 to us. "You will see heaven opened and the angles of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Jesus is the conduit, the highway, the ladder between humanity and God.

Jesus our intercessor speaks to the church in Matthew 28 by saying, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." God speaks to Jacob with similar words. I am with you and will watch over you...I will not leave you..." Ge. 28:15

Jacob trusts God, and Jacob believes. Jacob repents and chooses to believe that God is with him always and everywhere. And Jacob leaves his old predisposition of fear for the reality of assurance.

We have said that Jacob's story is our story, and right about now, Jacob looks like he is really enjoying the Godly jackpot he has encountered.

However...Jacob has fled in fear. Fell asleep. Dreamed about a heavenly highway between heaven and earth. He has heard and encountered words of assurance from God. The theophany, the encounter with God, changes Jacob. And he consecrates, and remembers the place where this all has occurred, by raising a stone altar, anointing it with oil, and renaming it.

Way to go Jacob. Way to go.

Read verse 20. Jacob makes a vow. We spoke of the solemnity and power of speaking a vow. It is binding for all time. So Jacob vows to God after all God has assured him of and revealed to him... "If." What? 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 fathers house, 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."

Whoa, whoa, whoa, Jacob, Jacob, Jacob. Let's analyze this. God has already said he is with you, wont leave you, will provide for you. God, not some false God, not some person, not some clan leader or earthly king. God of all, the Creator God who just revealed to you Jacob that he is God. And you have recognized Him by anointing and setting up an altar. Yet Jacob, you base covering second guesser, you still say if. Why it makes me want to shout, "Jacob, you are just like...me. Like you, like so many of us.

Jacob is human. He is a man of choices, free will, a bit of a back slider I guess. And He is like us.

God has given Jacob the winning jackpot number, assuring him of land, descendants, safety, return to the old homestead, wealth. And God will be a traveling companion to watch over

Jacob, yet Jacob is a man of the ...if. Jacob with fingers crossed, with a lucky clover leaf key ring with a rabbit's foot attached wearing a lucky jersey or pair of sandals, and has just tried to cover his bases in human form.

People of God, we too are like Jacob at times. Right. We live in the world of doubt in the face of assurance. Will the government take care of my financial needs in retirement? Will there be enough in a 401 K or social security? A spouse gives assurance of faithful love, the partner questions or doubts. The boss promises better working conditions and we are skeptics. The gas gauge reads 3/4 full and we can't leave town without a full tank?

We are humans, created beings full of free will and questions. We are a people who are prone to doubt, or to wonder. God gives us assurance through Jesus Christ. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Jesus didn't say, get cleaned up first, be worthy for me to die for you. No Jesus gave up his life for each of us, while we were yet sinners.

Jacob puts an "if" in front of his vow. How do we do that as well to God? God, if you get me out of this jam, I'll worship you. If you prove that you are God, I'll believe it. If you let me pass the test, get the job, hit a home run, get a new bike, find the right spouse, be successful, be wealthy, then I will.....? What? Jacob accepted God's invitation den offer and tried to say, if only.

People of God, God gives us his vow, his promise with no "if onlys." You see for us, a people in need of grace and salvation and mercy only praised by God the Father through Jesus the Son and the power of the Spirit, we often make arrangements and bargains hedging our bets. This text is about utter surrender, and allowing ourselves to be fully dependent on God.

Jacob like us takes back a bit of what he has said in conversation with God. Do we do that? Do we operate in our own strength, failing to consult scripture, moving in a paltry and shallow prayer life, failing to seek God's guidance?

God gives us chance after chance to call on hi, to rely on him. And for us, we see Jacob as a brother. One who like us, is fully human, and in need of assurance and God's grace.

Is there one among you that is in need of God's assurance and grace? In need of forgiveness, a washing away of guilt, or a sense of unworthiness? I want us to spend some time in God's presence, speaking to him in the silence. Asking him to restore and renew our hearts. Asking God to show us and guide us where we are to be in his service. Spend time allowing God to speak to your heart, giving you words of comfort and strength. God wants you to know that you are loved, forgiven, you are worthy, you are loved, and you are a child of the savior Jesus Christ, if you but call on his name, ask him to be Lord of your life and take away your sins.

This morning is an opportunity for us to take part in the holy meal of communion. A meal where we share the bread and cup and we celebrate the presence of Jesus Christ at the table. I invite you to be in an attitude of receiving this holy sacrament.