

Genesis 28:10-17

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Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold, 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! ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, 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." ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

I was once working with a lady at Menards in Eau Claire, WI, who, when she found out I was going to school to be a pastor, told me she was a very spiritual person as well. In fact, she told me the reason she'd been working so many hours was that she was saving up to move down to Sedona, AZ, together with her daughter. She'd visited one time before, and she said that when she was there she was overcome with this overwhelming sense of spirituality that seemed unique to that city.

I was thinking that this was unique to her, but after doing a little digging, I discovered that Sedona is actually considered by many to be one of the most spiritual places on earth. In the surrounding countryside are what are claimed to be many locations of divine-spirit energy—"vortexes" is what they call them. These are supposed to be the places where spiritual energy is at its highest frequency. If you meditate on one of these locations, you are supposed to be able to tap into the frequency of the universe and change your life. If you stop in town for some shopping, you'll find shops loaded with healing crystals, aura reading stations, psychics, even cans of divine vortex energy to take on the go.

I'm hoping none of you feel compelled to take a pilgrimage to Sedona for such things. Because, the truth is, you don't need it. If you want to encounter the Divine, you don't need to travel across the country to do so. Consider our text this morning. Jacob encounters the Divine; God gives him a vision of heaven and angels coming down and then God Himself speaks. And this wasn't because Jacob happened to nap on some divine vortex of spiritual energy. Jacob had this blessed encounter simply because God chose down to him. And Jacob rightly concluded, **"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."** If you want to find such a place, don't look too hard, because you're there already. For in this house, God comes to bless you as well.

Now many Americans want to have a spiritual experience. They want to have an encounter with the divine. Some will travel great distances to find a "spiritual" location; I guess we could say they're trying to find their own Jacob's Ladder. Maybe that's not you. I don't think any of you spend your weekdays trekking the world in an attempt to find God. But *maybe* you've been swept up in a similar line of thought at times.

Have you ever found yourself wishing to have your emotions stirred a little bit more at church? Or have you ever longed to feel what they call a "Spiritual High," to feel a little bit closer to God? Are

there days when you worry that your faith is failing if you don't *feel* very spiritual? Have you ever felt dissatisfied with our church here because you don't necessarily walk out the doors feeling very much at all? These types of thoughts aren't uncommon for Christians; we do often *feel* as if we should feel something. And when we don't feel much, we might start wondering if we're really Christians at all.

Is it really that wrong though to long for those types of spiritual feelings, to want for your emotions to be stirred here in church? Certainly, it is a gift from God when our emotions are stirred by His Word, but as sinners we are very adept at ruining God's gifts. And because of that, there is a dangerous trap that we can fall into when we put too much stock in our emotions.

Let's think about it this way: Is it good to do good things for others? Yes, obviously! Is it God-pleasing when we desire to keep the Ten Commandments and follow God's will? Again, obviously yes. Are our good works good? Of course. But with these things, we can fall into a trap by making more of them than we ought to. For instance, do you think it's advisable to try to do more good things *in order to* get into God's good graces? Do you think that because sin separates you from God that you should be doing *as many good works as possible* in order to get closer to Him? Certainly we all would recognize that line of thinking is completely wrong, since that type of thinking is what we might call "works righteousness." It's the idea that I can earn a place before God by *my* way of living, and we know we're not saved by anything we do. There is no amount of good that we can do to get closer to God, and that's ok, because Jesus has already brought us close to God.

So you recognize that works righteousness, which we could also refer to as "*Moralism*," is not our ladder to heaven. But what about your emotions? What about your feelings? What about your spirituality? These things aren't bad by themselves—they're blessings—but the pitfall is that we might start to rely on them even more than we rely on God's Word. We can wrap up these types of things along with spiritual pilgrimages to Sedona under another term called "Mysticism." Mysticism is a very common approach to Christianity in America today.

Mysticism is this idea that if you *really* are a Christian, you need to feel it. You need to get worked up over it. You need to be driven to tears by the Word of God. You need to experience a spiritual high at church, and if you *don't* then you need to find another church because God isn't working there at yours. Or even worse, if you don't feel these things, *maybe* you aren't really a Christian at all.

The problem with both Mysticism and Moralism is that both of these approaches to spirituality involve a human being's strenuous effort to get close to God. It requires a person to do something in order to reach God, whether working with their hands or working up their emotions. But what does that say about God if that's your approach? It implies that God is far above the fray, that He is far off and uninvolved with us, that God is a goal that needs to be attained by man. And that *just doesn't square* with what God tells us about Himself.

God tells us that every *human* effort to get closer to God is futile—whether we strive with our works or our emotions, it is worthless. And that's ok. Because God is no passive force. Our *God* is the One who is active. The important thing is not our attempt to ascend to God, but God's descent to us. You see, in the Bible, we learn about God who is *not* an impartial observer. Far from that, He is the One who came down to be nearer to us. God reveals Himself to us in Jesus Christ, who is God in the flesh, God on the cross, God who comes down to be with sinners.

So if you want to encounter the divine, if you want to stand in the presence of God, that sort of encounter is not achieved by our own puny desires or efforts. But we *are able* to stand in the presence of God, to have an encounter with the Divine, and it occurs simply because God makes it happen. Case in point, our text: we find Jacob in the middle of running away from his brother Esau, because Esau wants to kill him. And why is that? Well, it's because Jacob stole the eldest son's birthright from Esau, who was his older brother.

You might remember how that all came about. Isaac was married to Rebekah who gave birth to twin boys: Esau and Jacob. As the oldest child, tradition said that Esau would get double the inheritance that Jacob would receive, and that he would enjoy the privilege of being the leader of the family once his father died. God had something else in mind. God spoke to Rebekah and told her that with her twin boys, it would be the opposite: Jacob would receive the greater blessing, and the older would serve the younger.

So, with this promise *from God* in hand, what does Jacob do? He decides to try and just steal that blessing for himself. First, in Genesis 25, we could read the account when Esau came home exhausted from his labors, and he asks his brother Jacob for a bowl of stew. Jacob withholds that stew from Esau until Esau promises that Jacob could get his birthright, the double inheritance. Not a very fair trade, yet Esau agrees. Years later, when Isaac is growing old and the time comes for him to bless his sons, Jacob is up to his old tricks again! He puts on a disguise, goes in to see his father under the pretenses that he is actually Isaac's eldest son Esau, and unawares of the treachery, Isaac gives Jacob the double blessing—which, by the way, was the same blessing that *God* had already promised to Jacob. Esau finds out, is understandably furious, and he plots to kill Jacob. Jacob runs away, and here we find him.

And it's interesting. So often, God refers to *Himself* as the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. But when we think about Abraham and how he walked with God, and then when we think about Isaac and how he walked with God, and then we think about *Jacob*—the apple really seems to have fallen far from the tree. Again and again, rather than walking with God in faith and trust, Jacob often relied on his own craftiness and cunning instead of simply clinging to God's promises. And here he is, on the run for his life, and he lays down to rest. And he is not at all *looking* for God; he's sleeping. But that does not stop Almighty God from visiting Jacob. Which brings us an important truth—God's presence is not determined by the worthiness of people.

All this that we are told about Jacob is not designed to glorify *Jacob* but to glorify the living God. When we are shocked by the shady and downright wicked things that the patriarchs did, it is perfectly clear that God did not bother with these men because they were such splendid examples of morality and wisdom. They certainly were not that. So, the reason God cares for them and refers to Himself by their names was not about them. It was only about Himself. You see, the LORD is the God of grace. He's the God who shows love to those who don't deserve it. Just as Jesus went and visited tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers, so He goes to visit the straying soul, the unworthy sinner to call them to Himself—like Jacob, and like you and me.

And when does this happen? Jacob was clearly certain that the God of Grace had visited him. But when can we be certain that we're in God's presence? We can be certain that we're standing in the presence of God when God speaks. In our text, He speaks to Jacob: ***"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west***

and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, 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.

And God continues to come down to us here today. Here today, we have encountered the Divine. We are in the presence of God right now, because, here today, God is still speaking to us. When God comes down and speaks, He does so to bless us—just as He did for Jacob. God blessed Jacob, told unworthy, scheming, runaway Jacob, that he would be the ancestor of the Savior of the World; that his offspring would come as God’s ultimate blessing. But God didn’t come down blessing *only* Jacob. Did you hear any other names mentioned? I don’t mean Abraham and Isaac, although they were blessed through their Savior too. There were other names mentioned: Vallyly was mentioned, Benter was in there, Wenner, Turner, Yates, Ohlmann—we were all mentioned. That’s because God said, ***“In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”***

And the Lord God went to extraordinary lengths to win this blessing for all the families of the earth, including yours. For thousands of years, He kept these promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He stuck with a rebellious people, all so that He could bless us. And when the fulness of the time had come, God kept that promise. He appeared to mankind, revealed Himself in a definitive way. The One through whom all things were made came down, became flesh, and dwelt among us. He came down and became a curse for us, as it is written, ***“Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”*** (Galatians 3:13) He took that curse in His flesh for us, so that the blessing of God might come freely to all of us.

And now, the God of Jacob, who appeared to Jacob, who appeared on earth and died and rose again, *now* He comes to *you* today. God is in *this* place, as through His Word He gives you *His Word*. He appears in this place today to bless you, to say, ***“Take heart, your sins are forgiven.”*** (Matthew 9:2) He comes to assure you, unworthy though you are, that *these* blessings—thousands of years in the making—are *yours!* He comes to announce to you that *all* of the blessings which He won on the cross—eternal life, forgiveness of sins, peace with God, heaven—He is now handing it freely to you.

Last weekend, when we celebrated the Lord’s Supper, Jesus came down to us, not just through His Word, but also in His body and blood which He shed on the cross. He told us that the bread *is* His body, that the wine *is* His blood. When we have a baptism here at church, we are able to witness God coming down again, to bless even the youngest among us. When the water is poured on the child’s head, we are told that it is a washing of regeneration, a renewal of the Holy Spirit. So we see, God continues to come down to visit us.

You know what this all means, don’t you? We might not always *feel* like this place is all that awesome. Church might sometimes *feel* like just another part of our weekly schedule at times. But even if God catches us sleeping, He still comes down so that we might encounter the Divine, so that we might stand in His presence, so that He can bless us and keep us, so that He can make His face shine upon us and be gracious to us, so that He can lift up His smile toward us, and looking at us, give us peace. So, you see, God has blessed you here today. There is no more spiritual, no more awesome place on earth than right here right now, because God is here. Here He is, giving you His Word that your sins are forgiven, that He is taking you to a new land, the land of heaven. And He assures you, ***“I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*** The only thing that we can say, is, ***“How awesome is this place! This is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.”*** Thanks be to God! Amen.