

July 19, 2020

Genesis 28: 10-19a

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Upon this Rock”

Whenever I hear or read this passage about Jacob in the Book of Genesis a song comes to mind. I learned it as a child as did many of you, “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” In the song, every rung goes higher, higher. This brings to mind the kind of ladder we climb to paint the side of a building but the biblical scholars tell us the Hebrew word used here suggests more of a ziggurat. Now there’s a strange word, ziggurat. Do you know it? Ziggurats are the rectangle shaped, ascending stairways built by the ancients to help them get closer to where they believed God was, up there somewhere. So, maybe Jacob’s ladder is really more of a stairway and this brings to mind a very different kind of song. Instead of the bible school song, “Jacob’s Ladder,” I think of the Led Zeppelin song, “Stairway to Heaven.” This takes us back to the year

1971. I know I may have just lost some of you with this but stay with me. Some say the song written by Led Zeppelin’s guitarist, Jimmy Page, and singer, Robert Plant, is one of the greatest rock songs ever. I don’t know about that but I was intrigued to learn that the band says the song is about a woman who gets everything she wants. Part of the lyric is, “There’s a lady who’s sure that all glitters is gold and she’s buying a stairway heaven...” Through the song, Led Zeppelin challenges a culture that thinks it can buy it’s way into peace and happiness. We might not expect that from a rock band but that’s the message. We can’t buy our way into a good life and, even if we tried, we certainly can’t buy or build our way to heaven. This is a fascinating tie back to the story of Jacob in the bible. There’s a surprise, Led Zeppelin and the bible. It all makes sense when we are reminded of the story of Jacob, and I’d like to take a moment to recap who he was and what he was about.

Today's reading tells us Jacob was a dreamer but more to the point he was a schemer. Like the lady who tried to build a stairway to heaven, Jacob wanted the good life and he was willing to do anything to get it. In our story, Jacob is on the run because he's just tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the full share of the family blessing which leaves his twin brother, Essau, with nothing. Essau is determined to kill Jacob to avenge this deceit. Now, let's stop there for a moment. Just because a person is a central character in a bible story doesn't mean that person lives a God-centered life. Jacob didn't think much about his life with God. Jacob was only concerned about Jacob. This is one of the most surprising things about God. Even when the priorities and energy of our lives are far from what God intends, God remains fully connected to us. God cares even when we don't. God is working God's purpose in the world even when we mistakenly think that purpose has nothing to do with us.

The night Jacob dreams about a stairway to heaven he sees angels descending and ascending. It's a message from God so that Jacob knows no matter how much he schemes or manipulates those around him, God is right there, connected to his life and ready when Jacob is ready to live a life of faith. That night was the beginning of the conversion of Jacob's life. "Surely the Lord is in this place," Jacob said, "and I did not know it." To help him not forget the importance of what he's learned, Jacob takes the rock that was his pillow through the night and sets it as a monument. He names the place Bethel, which means house of God. The one who wanted all the blessings of the world, the one who did anything to get what he wanted, is now on the path that moves him toward the real blessing, a life assured of God's presence and love.

Our life stories are not all that different from Jacob's. We get wrapped up in what we want and go after what we're certain will make us more secure or happy and

we may forget that God is always at the center. One of our church members, Kristina MacKenzie, has recently been through some tough times and she's discovered, again, the central place of God in her life. She's agreed to share some of that story with us today, and I'd like to turn to her so we can be renewed in our own lives in our assurance of God's presence and love.

[Share Kristina's video testimony]

As I listen to Kristina, I doubt she will forget that God is always with her but if she needed it maybe she'd place a stone somewhere close to remind her that even in a time of great loss and challenge, she is loved and held in God's arms. Is there a place that is that kind of reminder for you? Today our congregation is beginning a slow and cautious re-opening of our building for in-person worship. It's so different from what we're used to. Because of the pandemic we're wearing face coverings, limiting our seating and observing social distancing so

that health and safety aren't compromised. For many of us, the building of the church is the kind of place that reminds us of the central place of God in our lives. For many good reasons, it's still not the right time for many to come back into the building and that is as it should be, but most of us drive by the building throughout the flow of our week. Here's my invitation to you. When you come close to or drive past our church building, let it be a reminder to you that God is with you wherever you are and whatever you are doing. When Jesus was with Peter one day he said of Peter's life, "upon this rock I will build my church." Jesus wasn't talking about a building but this building can be our reminder that what Jesus was talking about was a life that has the firm foundation of God's love, grace and peace. As Kristina has reminded us, whether we are in the sanctuary, in our cars, at the office, in the park, in our homes, with our families or my

ourselves, God is with us, and this is now and always our
rock and our salvation.