

"A LADDER FROM HEAVEN"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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## "A LADDER FROM HEAVEN"

TEXT: "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not."

Genesis 28: 16

### INTRODUCTION

When I was a teenager in Summer camp up in the Adirondacks, one of the songs that we loved to sing around the camp fire was "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." It was a kind of mellow song that one sang as a commitment to the Christian life. And the image I had as I sang was that I was, in some way, imitating the Old Testament hero, Jacob, climbing over various obstacles toward a more complete dedication to God. It was a little surprising later on to discover that Jacob's ladder was not the action of a saint moving toward God, but was a ladder that God dropped from heaven into the dream of an Old Testament "con-man".

### BACKGROUND OF STORY

Let me explain the background of this story. By the time of this incident described in Genesis 28, we have already been introduced to Jacob the liar, Jacob the cheat, Jacob the deceiver. If you remember your Old Testament history, you'll recall that Jacob and his mother, Rebecca, conspire together to steal the birthright and the blessing that goes with it from Jacob's older brother, Esau. Acting on his mother's plan, Jacob manages to deceive his blind father, Isaac, and get the blessing which was intended for brother Esau.

Now when Esau heard what had happened, he vowed to kill Jacob and Jacob realizes the time is at hand to clear out and to make a fast exit. He leaves home under the pretext of finding a wife. He's sent back to the family homeland to seek her, which both gets him out of the way and enables him to meet the kind of girl he'd be happy to bring home to meet the family.

Having left behind the borders of the land where Isaac lived, Jacob came into a new country and at evening lay down - as was the custom of the nomad - with his head propped on a stone pillow. And there - in the most unlikely of circumstances - to this most unlikely of persons, God appears to him in a dream, high above a ladder which is stretched from heaven to earth, on which an angel procession moves up and down. And God repeats to Jacob that ancient covenant which He had first made to his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob has a great future and he will be the founder of a nation. And Jacob, waking from his dream cries out, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not!"

### LOOK AT THIS INCIDENT

I find myself itching to go on with the Jacob stories, but for today I want to stop right here and look with you at what this incident which took place some 4,000 years ago has to say to us today.

It's the obvious thing that to me is so amazing - that God is always meeting us in a time and a place where we do not expect to find Him. We are continually surprised by His presence in some unexpected moment in our lives.

If we are honest, we know that this surprise is our fault and our failure. We're not always ready to be aware. We often think of God as far away. We tend to think of God in connection with our Sunday morning service as if He was

somehow confined here rather than at large "out there" in the world.

Against that, and what is so amazing about this story, and the echoes of it reverberate all through the New Testament in what Jesus was saying, is the affirmation that God, while always present to us, does not just wait passively until we decide to notice, but in our least expectant moments, breaks into our lives, to our astonishment and sometimes to our change of heart.

INTERVIEW / QUESTIONS

So let's take a good look at Jacob and see what he can tell us about ourselves. And if you'll let your imagination set up a little fantasy, I would like you to imagine that you have just been watching this incident with Jacob and the ladder on a TV interview. The cameras that have been in for a "close-up" of Jacob's face, move away and the lights come up and our friend, Jacob, is being interviewed by Barbara Walters who is asking him for an interpretation and an instant replay and analysis.

I picture Barbara Walters saying in that strange, lisping voice of hers, "Jacob....we all saw your face during that experience and we know that you were definitely surprised by what happened, yes, even astonished by it. But what I'd like to know, Jacob, is WHY you were so surprised?"

And as Jacob begins to explain his reasons for surprise, he becomes the spokesman - not just for himself - but for all of us who have made the same excuses.

I think Jacob would begin by saying that he had every right to be surprised. Nothing in his past life and previous experience had prepared him for this kind of event. For one thing, he's in a foreign country. Nobody believed that the particular God he worshipped had any jurisdiction at all - maybe even existence - beyond the tribal boundary - the home base. A God just doesn't wander off to manifest Himself in somebody else's city or country.

Let me make the first of several parenthetical points that I want to make on this set of excuses. God is always breaking through the barriers we have set up. The world doesn't have much use any more, if ever, for the kind of God who belongs to one nation or one race of people. But how hard it is for us to get beyond the feeling that God belongs to us and has nothing to do with those folks we think of as "different" or perhaps, "the enemy". How hard it is for some to stretch their minds and imagine a God who is a God to both Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, a God who is a God to both the head of the government of South Africa and Bishop Tutu. It's so hard to hold this much in our minds because our God has been too small.

We are so willing to tailor our concept to our own image which is apt to be based on backgrounds and upbringing, and so we may tend to see a God who is white, or mail or Protestant. And, of course, we think of a God - if He were visible - who would look like us. How difficult it is to think of a God who is another color than ourselves, feminine or Jewish. How hard it is to think of a God who is unconcerned with the American way of life except where it is concerned with things like Justice and Mercy among all His children through the world. Our God - like Jacob's - may be too small!

Jesus, you'll recall, told a story that was a shocker to his listeners. It

had a hero who was a Good Samaritan and it shocked his listeners because it said to them that their little categories and boxes were no longer effective, that God was beyond all kinds of categories. One day we may wake up and say in amazement - in the manner of Jacob -

"Surely God was in that movement, that revolution, in that place or this place...for it was concerned with human values, with justice and mercy and love. He was there and we knew it not."

BACK TO THE INTERVIEW

But back to Barbara...crowding Jacob with the microphone. And Jacob, reflecting on his surprise at this religious experience, might have pointed out that he was surprised because he had not yet claimed this God as his own God. The God was - to be sure - the God of Abraham and Isaac, but he had not yet become Jacob's God. Jacob, you see, had laid no claim upon Him. Who would have ever thought that a deity would waste a moment's energy upon someone who did not claim him as his very own.

Let me jump to the present day and say this....doesn't that sound just like us? How very much we'd like to ride along on the religious coat-tails of a previous generation rather than make an individual religious commitment for ourselves. The God of our fathers has a lot of appeal. He grows mellow with age and he's there to turn to when we feel the need of His counsel or the comfort of His long and ripened experience. And between times we'd like Him to say in His "other - century home"....fara away...rather than unpacking Himself in our house and giving us advice and admonition we aren't seeking.

I talk to people from time to time who would like to be a part of this congregation. Many of them tell the same story...they were brought up in a Christian home elsewhere, perhaps baptised in the Church and then have drifted away from it. Now it may be 10 to 15 years later, but they are feeling a tug to get back to their roots and asking what it means and what to do. I think I know what it means, and it is mostly that this person has gone through life never having staked out a religious faith or claim for himself and life is pressing him and asking him to do it now. He's ripe for the "born again" experience.

We know we need it - not for the public image, but our personal comfort. When we are beset by worries and misfortunes and a gnawing emptiness that brings us to the edge of despair, it will not be our parents' faith but the power of our own faith and commitment that brings us through. When we face death, it is not the warm memory of a grandmother's faith, but the assurance of our own personal experience and faith commitment that will be crucial for us. And so Jacob says,

"Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not."

Some of us have come to that place where we may say, "Surely the Lord is here... in my life and I knew it not. How do I make Him my Lord?"

ONE MORE EVASION

Let me take you back to Jacob again and one more evasion to consider. For if Barbara Walters had stuck with it, as she does so tenaciously in her interviews, the real truth of Jacob's situation might have surfaced. Why was he surprised?

Because, friend, he was a man on the run. He had put himself in danger with his piece of sneaking thievery. He had hurt his brother, and violated his daddy's trust and love. And now he was running from those very sins he had committed like every human being among us tries at some time to do, believing that we can run away from the judgement of God as well. And then God finds this fugitive and holds before him the vision of what he is destined to become. And Jacob, of course, is speechless. Who wouldn't be?

Let me suggest to all of us that God is always breaking through the barriers which our sin has created to bring us face to face with Himself, with His judgement and forgiveness.

We all know the power of wrong doing to separate us from each other. Nothing divides or separates people more sharply or tragically than a lie told, a wrong committed, a trust violated, a confidence betrayed. It is not only the victim that feels this separation. Even more the wrong doer feels it. And so it is with God. The sins we commit do not turn God against us, though they call forth His judgement upon our wrong-doing. The tragedy of sin is the way it turns us against God.

Esau, the brother who was wronged is hurt...but he still lives at home in the land of God, the God of his fathers. It's young Jacob, the sinner, fleeing to a strange country, on the run, and caught with fear when he discovers God reaching across those desert spaces of his soul and speaking to him whether he would have it or not. It reminds one of those beautiful lines from Francis Thompson's poem, The Hound of Heaven. Some are familiar with those opening lines:

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him down the arches of the year;  
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat - and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet -  
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

BUT GOD WILL NOT STAY SHUT OUT

God will not stay shut out. And in this story, the story of Jacob has its ending in the story of Jesus Christ. God, Jesus told us, is like the shepherd seeking the lost sheep. God is like a woman sweeping 'till she recovers her one silver coin. God is like a parent welcoming home the strayed child, seeking him or her, seeing him or her in that far country a long way off where he or she went to hide. Ours is a seeking God.

And God brings him home...brings him to Himself, forgives, accepts, restores. Perhaps there is some one present who needs to hear that Gospel word today. Hello somebody. Do you know what I'm talking about somebody?

"Whither shall I flee from thy spirit?" asks the Psalmist,  
"and whither shall I flee from thy presence...if I ascend  
up into heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in  
Sheol, thou art there....If I take the wings of the morning".

"Even there Thy hand shall lead me...and Thy right hand shall hold me." Yes,  
in the midst of every human crisis, God seeks us out and calls us back to Him-  
self. What a Gospel and what a God! You see this ladder that is in the  
dream which we sang about was not a ladder Jacob fashioned for himself and  
set out to climb to heaven. It was a ladder that God set down before him as  
He does before us. It reminds us of the seeking love of God reaching out to  
every one of us and saying, "No matter what you have done...you are mine."

CLOSING No wonder Jacob was surprised and Barbara - our interviewer -  
would be caught off guard and probably shake her head and wonder...  
and wonder....

How many times across the years of my ministry...in a hospital room,  
perhaps, or some other place where there has been pain, suffering, uncertainty,  
heartbreak, loss, I have felt God dropping a ladder and in the quiet place of  
my own heart found myself murmuring:

"Surely God is in this place and I know it not".

I pray that that may happen to you...every place you go and every time that God  
drops a ladder into your life...with Jacob you may say, "Indeed, God is in this  
place and I knew it not."

PRAYER Be near to each of us, O God, in all we do...in what we may face  
this coming week. Hold us. Strengthen us. Help us to climb  
higher and higher in our faith in Jesus, Our Lord, for in so doing we know we  
are coming closer to you, God and Father of us all. Amen.

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Having left behind the borders of the land where Isaac lived, Jacob came into a new country and at evening lay down - as was the custom of the nomad - with his head propped on a stone pillow. And there - in the most unlikely of circumstances - to this most unlikely of persons, God appears to him in a dream, high above a ladder which is stretched from heaven to earth, on which an angel procession moves up and down. And God repeats to Jacob that ancient covenant which He had first made to grandfather, Abraham. Jacob has a great future and he will be the founder of a nation. And Jacob, waking from his dream cries out, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not!" ~~A great line.~~

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If we are honest, we know that this surprise is our fault and our failure. We're not always ready to be aware. We often think of God as far away. We tend to think of God in connection with our Sunday service as if He was somehow confined here rather than at large "out there" in the world.

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reverberate all through the New Testament in what Jesus was saying,) is the affirmation that God, while always present to us, does not just wait passively until we decide to notice, but in our least expectant moments, breaks into our lives, to our astonishment and sometimes to our change of heart.

#### INTERVIEW AND QUESTIONS

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We are so willing to tailor our concept to our own image which is apt to be based on background and upbringing, and so we may tend to see a God who is white, or male, or Protestant. And, of course, we think of a God - if He were visible - who would look like us. How difficult it is to think of a God who is another color than ourselves, who is feminine or Jewish. How hard it is to think of a God who is unconcerned with the American way of life except where it is concerned with things like Justice and Mercy among all His children through the world. Our God - like Jacob's - is far too small!

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Some of us have come to the place where we may say, "Surely the Lord is here...in my life and I knew it not. How do I make Him my Lord?"

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To sin is to be self-centered, and that is to shut God out as well as other

BUT GOD WILL NOT STAY SHUT OUT

But God will not stay shut out. And in this story, the story of Jacob has its ending in the story of Jesus Christ. God, Jesus told us, is like the shepherd seeking the lost sheep. God is like a woman sweeping 'till she recovers her one silver coin. God is like a parent welcoming home the strayed child, seeking him and seeing him in that far country a long way off where he went to hide.

And God brings him home...brings him to Himself, forgives, accepts and restores. Perhaps there is some one present who needs to hear that Gospel note this day.

"Whither shall I flee from thy spirit?" asks the Psalmist, "and whither shall I flee from thy presence. If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there."

Yes, in the midst of every human crisis, God seeks us out and calls us back to Himself. What a Gospel and what a God! You see this ladder that is in the dream which we sang about was not a ladder Jacob fashioned for himself and set out to climb to heaven on. It was a ladder that God set down before him as He does before us. It reminds us of the seeking love of God reaching out to every one of us and saying, "No matter what you have done...you are mine".

No wonder Jacob was surprised and Barbara, our interviewer, would be caught off guard and probably shake her head and wonder....and wonder...

CLOSING

Friend, take heart and "be of good cheer" for we're approaching the end of the sermon.

One of those hot, steamy, sticky days in July I had the privilege of taking communion to a person over at the Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, a person who was facing a very serious operation. It was one of those rush, rush days...lots of calls...things weren't getting done....but I dashed off in the direction of Brooklyn in my car and got caught in a traffic jam coming out of the Battery Tunnel.

It wasn't helped by the fact that directly before me was one of those lighted signs telling you the time and the temperature. My car kept getting hotter and hotter. The time kept getting later and later and the thermometer on that sign read it was 96 degrees. And so, of course, I took the wrong turn off Prospect Park Expressway. When I finally found the hospital and a place to park I asked the guard inside how to get to a certain room and meet the person who was going to have a double bypass operation a day or two later. He told me how to get there and I found him finally. He told me he was facing a rough time of it and he knew it was going to be serious. Then he said,

"I realize, however, just like every other time in my life that I'm in God's hands and I don't have to worry about it. I know that regardless of what happens, for me everything is going to be all right".

Suddenly in the midst of a 96 degree hot day, in the midst of a hospital room where there was pain, suffering, uncertainty, God dropped a ladder for me and I found myself murmuring: "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not". May that happen to you every place you go and every time God drops a ladder into your life.

PRAYER Be near to each of us, O God, in all we do...in what we may face this coming week. Strengthen us. Hold us. Help us to climb higher and higher in our faith in Jesus, our Lord for in so doing we are coming closer to You, God and father of us all. Amen