

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, July 23, 2017)

Texts:

**Genesis 28:10-19** (*The Voice*)

Meanwhile Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. As dusk approached *one day*, he came to a place where he could stay for the night. He saw stones *scattered* all around and put one of them under his head; then he lay down to sleep. *During the night*, God gave him a dream. He saw a ladder set up on the earth, and its top reached to the heavens. He saw some messengers of God ascending and descending on it. At the very top stood the Eternal One.

Eternal One: I am the Eternal One, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you are now lying is the land I *have promised to give to you and your descendants*. Your descendants will be as many as there are specks of dust on the earth. You will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Through your descendants, all the families of the earth will find true blessing. Know I am with you, and I will watch over you no matter where you go. *One day* I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done all I have promised you.

*The dream ended, and Jacob woke up from his sleep.*

Jacob (*to himself*): There is no doubt in my mind that the Eternal One is in this place—and I didn't even know it!

*But even as he said this*, a bit of fear came over him.

Jacob: This place is absolutely awesome! It can be none other than the house of God and the gateway into heaven!

So early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had put under his head, set it up as a pillar, and then poured oil on top of it *to commemorate his experience with God*. He named that place Bethel, *which means "house of God."* Before that the name of the city had been called Luz.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"A Stone Pillow Blessing"**

This is one of those texts that I'm intrigued by and called to when I read it and then wander through the days following as to what in the world was I thinking and what was God saying through giving it to me?!

Angels and ladders, a fleeing son, a wild dream and a stone pillow. How could any of this possibly be relevant to us today?

As usual, it's most helpful to begin with the basics and get a feel for the time and place we're in. To do that, let's travel back and get an idea of what has brought our main character, for we dare not call him a hero, at least not yet, to this place on his life's journey. We're only in the 28th chapter of the first book of the Bible, so it shouldn't be too lengthy, right?!

Jacob's story begins just 3 chapters earlier in Genesis 25 as he is born to Isaac and Rebecca, Isaac being the survivor of a certain close-shave altar incident with his father Abraham and his prone to laughter mother Sarah, who you may remember giggling away a few Sundays ago. The name given to Jacob means "heel grabber" or "supplanter." So, here we have the first thing to learn – be careful what you name your children. Although, as will be quite meaningful as we proceed, Dutch biblical scholar Dr. Jan Fokkeman notes that the name can also be interpreted as a shortened version in the Hebrew meaning, "God may protect." So, lesson number two, be careful what you read and how you interpret it!

But, sure enough, when Jacob is born, he emerges grasping the heel of his much hairier twin, Esau. Unfortunately all that hair does not provide strength of mind, as just before our story today, Esau sells his birthright to Jacob because he was famished from working in the fields and was willing to barter for the stew Jacob had just made.

Jacob proceeds to take that birthright and, with his mother's help, donned Esau's clothes and laid goatskins on his arms and neck so as to fool old blind Isaac into bestowing the birthright upon him thinking he was Esau.

Fearing for his life, Jacob's mother Rebecca orders Jacob to travel to her brother Laban's house in Haran until Esau's anger has abated.

And it is here on his way to Haran, that Jacob becomes tired and decides it's safe enough to lie down for a quick rest, finding a nearby stone for his pillow.

In our lectionary psalm for today, the well-known 139, we hear the psalmist's singing out, "O God you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even as Jacob thinks he is fleeing his home, his responsibility and his horrible misdeeds, God is ever with him, searching him out, knowing what's going on in his head, traveling with him on his path and, as he finally must lie down, letting him know that God is acquainted with all his ways as his dream unfolds and God, ever loving, ever faithful, ever present and putting covenant over punishment, tells him of the blessings to come and assures him that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in him and his offspring and that God will be with him and keep him wherever he goes.

As I read this story and pondered over God's extraordinary blessing upon the woefully undeserving Jacob, I couldn't help but think of Jesus's parable of the workers in the vineyard as found in Matthew 20 wherein the one who hires the workers pays them all equally regardless of how long they worked.

My same wonderment and ire arise at this story of Jacob before us today as it does at at Jesus's parable of seeming inequality and unfairness that those who appear to us to not carry their load or, here in Jacob's case, purposely deceive and cheat another out of what is his are seemingly rewarded by God and given the proverbial keys to the kingdom.

But perhaps what Jesus tells his listeners at the end of His parable can help us to understand God and Jacob in today's story. For when the workers grumble against the landowner for what they feel is unfair he says to them, " I am doing you no wrong...take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Hmmm... point taken Jesus. In our great desire for justice and fairness and equality, let us all remember that we do our work and God does God's work. In those places where we don't understand God's treatment of others as compared to ourselves or in whatever situation we may be considering, we do well to remember that God's ways are not our ways and that "justice is mine, sayeth the Lord."

And then there's the dream itself. Interpretations abound here as they do with anybody who tries to make sense out of a dream. They can range from the rather exacting specifics of medieval French rabbi and Torah commentator Rashi who saw the ladder as signifying the exiles that the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Jewish Messiah: with the angels representing the exiles of Babylonia, Persia, and Greece each climbing up a certain number of steps, paralleling the years of the exile, before they "fell down"; and the angel representing the last exile, that of Edom, climbing higher and higher into the clouds. Whew!

Or, for a more modern take, we've got Esther M. Menn, a professor and dean at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago seeing Jacob's dream as one that, "discloses the hidden yet active presence of God at this chance stop along the way. God's ongoing engagement in the world and in Jacob's disrupted life portrayed through a striking vision of stairs reaching from earth to heaven...recalling the stepped ziggurat or mud-brick mountain uniting heaven and earth prominent in Mesopotamian cities with God appearing not to royalty or priests but to a terrified refugee.

Professor Mann sees the angels as divine errand runners continually ascending and descending to do God's work in the world.

Exploring these and many other translations of Jacob's dream, I like the idea of how God is communicating and making covenant with Jacob through the mystery of this dream the best. For me, the idea of angels, or messengers ascending and descending a ladder or staircase is simply our very human way of trying to bring together this idea that we are in God's world but not of it and that there is a connection always going on between the ways of God and the ways of humanity as the whole of God's kin-dom continues to come together in spite of or sometimes even because of humanity's actions here on earth. The fact that God comes to stand beside Jacob, promising unfolding blessings and the continuation of humanity to the west, east, north and south along with blessings untold and a covenant of being with Jacob wherever he goes, cements for me God's promise to all of us to never leave us alone and to walk with us always even unto the ends of the earth.

"No matter how many times we read or hear those elegant promises, they are utterly beautiful and fill us, at each hearing, with a sure and sustaining hope," Rev. Kate Matthew wrote in her UCC commentary this week. "God," she writes, "in a sense intrudes upon our lives [and] comes across the divide, making a home in our midst... In good news or bad, in joy and sorrow, we hold fast to the sure knowledge that God is with us always, just as God promised, no matter where we go."

Taking Jacob's story and his dream into the context of our own lives, we have much to carry with us. When we find ourselves alone, fleeing from our mistakes, terrified of our fate, God offers us comfort, a word of blessing and a renewed covenant to be with us always that we may take that blessing and comfort into the world, connecting all people to God.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World," she writes, "We are the dreamers of the promise, set apart to bless all the families of the earth," here, "where it has pleased God to be with us....where the bright rungs of God's ladder touch down on our own ordinary pieces of the earth."

When Jacob arose from his dream early in the morning, he took the stone that he had used as a pillow and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on top of it to bless that place and name it Beth-el, the House of God."

As a symbol of God's promise to us, God's faithfulness to this congregation and to all of God's children, I'd like to invite our upcoming Interim Minister, Carol, forward to participate with me in a ritual of blessing and prayer as we call on God in this place and at this time. Carol...

**(At this point in our service, incoming Interim Pastor Carol Barrett joined Pastor Donald for the following ritual in which they poured oil on a stone placed at the front of the altar.)**

**Carol: Oil has long traditions of use for healing. We pour this oil on this stone, in this place, to remind us that this, too, is the house of God.**

**Donald: As we bring our prayers for healing, know that the oil is here. God is here.**

**Carol: For all who struggle with grief or fear, anger or pain, hear our prayers...**  
*(Oil is poured on the stone.)*

*SILENCE*

**Donald: For all who face a crossroads, a time of choosing, hear our prayers...**  
*(Oil is poured on the stone.)*

*SILENCE*

**Carol: For all who find it hard to come into the presence of God, or who have found the church non-receptive and ungracious, hear our prayers...**  
*(Oil is poured on the stone.)*

*SILENCE*

**Donald: For all on journeys home, for all setting out on new ways, for all who feel trapped and unable to move, hear our prayers...**  
*(Oil is poured on the stone.)*

*SILENCE*

**BOTH: May Spirit be poured on us all.**  
*(Oil is poured upon the stone again.)*

**Donald: God of dreams and visions, we enter into moments of stillness and feel your presence.**

**Carol:** Through relationships – our relationship with you and with others – we know that you are constantly with us.

**Donald:** We thank you for your many gifts to us, but especially for the gifts of being named, known, and cherished by you.

**Both:** Amen.