

“A Place and a People”

Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:14-19, 24-25

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As you listened to the reading of these two passages from Genesis and Romans, you may have found yourself wondering just what the connection... if any... there was between the two readings. One is about a dream that Isaac’s son Jacob has while resting in a particular place while out on a ‘road trip.’ A rather *strange* dream about angels climbing up and down ladders between heaven and earth. Makes you wonder just what he had to eat before going to bed. The other is a perhaps familiar passage from Romans in which Paul speaks of those who are led by God’s Spirit as being His ‘adopted children.’ And that as those ‘children,’ we are to ‘wait with patience’ for an unseen ‘hope.’

So, what IS the connection? Well, I could say that you have to wait ‘til the end of this message to find out... 😊 But I’m not...

As Christians we often refer to (with ‘pride?’) our affiliation with a ‘**church.**’ What does that word mean? It perhaps most often referred to as that holy place in which we gather, that ‘sanctuary’ where we experience God’s presence; a place given to us by God where we are reminded that God is with us, blessing us to GO and BE a blessing.

But as I’ve said before... I know, ‘ad nauseum’... that in truth the church must be more than a time or day of the week... or a particular ‘flavor’ of Christianity (i.e., ‘denomination’)... or even a physical location we travel to. To be ‘church’ is, more importantly, a people. Who we are... adopted children of God who must have hope in the midst of our **suffering**. Which there seems to be no shortage of these days...

So, I believe that these two very diverse passages of Scripture actually do have a common thread. And that is what it means to BE, in the words of our foundational statement of belief, “The Apostles’ Creed,” “*the holy catholic church.*” (‘catholic,’ little ‘c’... i.e., universal). That there is, to be sure, an important aspect of our identity as the church of Jesus Christ that is tied to that physical place where we experience the living God. BUT that we must not let that more ‘temporal’ expression of our faith overshadow our spiritual, everlasting identity as a beloved child of God... filled with the hope of glory in the face of suffering. That our faith in God is lived out both in “**A Place and (as) a People.**” _ We will start with Jacob. We began

this passage by reading that ***“Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.”*** (Genesis 28:10) Jacob is traveling from one town to another. Why? Because he is going to visit his uncle Laban for the purpose of marrying one of his daughters. A **‘fairly’ important life decision!** And it is on this journey that he stops to rest at a ***“certain place.”*** Which is, in truth, at this point an ‘UN-certain place.’ Or at least, **un-named.**

Here we read that Jacob took one the stones there and ***“put it under his head and lay down... and he dreamed.”*** (Genesis 28:11-12) As we would read, a pretty unusual dream. Which might be explained by his ‘rocky pillow!’ Not exactly conducive to ‘sweet dreams.’ Though another translation of that word ‘under’ (his head) can also be translated ***“near”*** his head. Which would probably make more sense. There it would probably serve more as protection... though in my case, would be unnecessary... my head’s hard enough already...

It is in this dream that Jacob sees a ladder... or as is probably a more accurate translation, a ‘ramp’ or ‘**stairway**’... on which angels, heavenly **messengers** of God, are going **up** and **down** between heaven and earth. It is in the midst of this dream that the Lord God comes to **stand ribeside him**, promising to not only give him that land, but that God would **STAY** with him: ***“Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”*** God goes on to tell Jacob that all the world would be blessed through him and his family descendants, and that He would bring Jacob back to that land... saying that ***“I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*** (Genesis 28:15)

When Jacob awakens, this vision is SO real that he knows it was not just his imagination; he proclaims that ***“SURELY the Lord is in this place... this awesome place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”*** (v.17) And he gives that heretofore anonymous ‘certain place’ a name: ***“Bethel.”*** Or, in the Hebrew, ***“Beth-el.”*** ***“The House of God.”***

Is that not one way we can often refer to the place of worship we call ‘church?’ ‘God’s House?’ Now, hopefully, we know that God’s presence is NOT limited to any particular building. And yet, as we do gather in worship in a particular sanctuary such as this, are not the various aspects of Jacob’s experience in Beth-el... that ‘house of God’ formally known as a ‘certain place’... the same attributes we should associate with THIS ‘house of God?’

That 'resting place' that God led Jacob to had no identity until **God's presence** was made REAL. Just as without you here, this is just an empty room. It is God's presence that makes this truly a 'sanctuary' of worship. That is in part why we have prayers of adoration, or 'invocation,' at the beginning of our time together. For we want to 'invoke,' 'call upon' the mighty name of Jesus to fill this place with His power, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit without which our gathering is meaningless.

It was as Jacob 'closed his eyes' to rest that the 'eyes of his heart' were opened to the power and reality of God's presence. Just as we too should 'close our eyes' to the world to allow the 'eyes of our heart' to know of God's presence. AND the presence of God's holy messengers traveling up and down that stairway. I prefer stairway because I think that it is much more secure, more reliable, than a mere 'ladder.' That 'angelic passageway' needs to be sturdy for the work of those angels. What were they doing? I think that they could have been carrying messages of PRAYER UP to God, and the BLESSINGS of God DOWN to Jacob. In the very same way that God's messengers carry OUR prayers to God... with some 'assist' from the Holy Spirit... and then 'rain down' God's blessings upon us.

It is in this 'house of God' that we are to believe in those same promises made to Jacob. That the next generations will be blessed in US, and in our 'offspring.' And that as we seek to fulfill God's trust in us as the standard bearer for future generations, we must NEVER lose sight of God's promises to Jacob, and us: ***"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."*** (Genesis 28:15) (Hmmm... kind of like what Jesus says in his last statement on the earth... ***"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*** (Matt. 28:20)) God says to Jacob, ***"I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*** (Like the words in Hebrews, that God ***"will never leave you nor forsake you."*** (Heb. 13:15) And just what IS that 'promise?' What does Jesus say in John 14? ***"If I go to prepare a place for you, I WILL COME BACK to take you to where I am, so that you may be there also..."***(Jn 14:3) Whether made under the Old Covenant or the New, the promise remains that God will not abandon His chosen ones.

But when Jesus does 'come back' to 'take us to where He is,' where do you think we will be? In this 'house of God' we call 'the church?' In the middle of our worship service? How convenient! Maybe... But most likely not. Think about where Jacob was when he had this

miraculous experience. He was on a journey to seek out his wife. The future mother of his children... the next generation in a pretty impressive line of God's chosen leaders. A **pivotal** time in his life! And God met him in the midst of that journey to reassure Jacob of this never-failing presence and providence. In a non-descript place that was transformed into the 'house of God' by His presence. A place where God's angels were hard at work.

If this pandemic should convince us of anything, it is the importance to not limit God's presence in our lives to a particular place of stained glass, pulpit and communion table. Wherever one may be worshipping this morning... from this very room to a living room, bedroom, or back porch... you ARE in a 'house of God.' You ARE in that common, non-descript place that is transformed by God's presence to a place of worship...where God meets you in your time of need, decision, struggle. You ARE in that place where God's angels are carrying your prayers up to God, and bringing down God's blessings upon you. Just as we believe that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, so too is God's presence the same from 'church house' to 'penthouse' to 'outhouse'...

Much more important than any particular physical place we may experience the living God, however, is that we worship him in the sanctuary of our HEART. The most crucial identity we have is not what denomination we belong to, or even what our last name is, but rather, the JOY we should feel as a **child of God!**

Paul said that ***"All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."*** That we must NOT fall victim to the fears and doubts that can so enslave us, but rather, ***"you have received a spirit of adoption, by which we cry 'Abba, Father!'"***

(Romans 8:14-15) 'Abba'... that most personal form of paternal title: 'Daddy.'

As we know, an adopted child has all of the rights and privileges as a natural-born child. He/she receives the same inheritance as other brothers/sisters. While I myself was an adopted child, I never felt any different than any of my friends in how I was loved by my parents. If anything, I felt loved even *moreso*, because I was not just born, I was CHOSEN! I was WANTED. There was that spirit in me by which I could cry with joy, 'Mama!' 'Daddy!'

As the adopted children of God, you and I are also given all of the rights and privileges of our Heavenly Father's only begotten Son. We will receive the same inheritance of our brother

Jesus. We should take great JOY in knowing that as you and I are led by God's Spirit, we can rest assured that we are no 'cosmic accident'... not some 'freak of nature'... but we are CHOSEN by God. The Father WANTS you! To which we should joyfully run to His open arms, exclaiming 'Daddy!'

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if there was ever a time for the church... not sticks and stones, but flesh and blood... to be a WITNESS to the love of our Heavenly Father and our brother Jesus, it is NOW. There are hurting, hostile, helpless, and hopeless people out there who are most certainly experiencing, in Paul's words, **"the sufferings of this present time."** And as he further said, that **"creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."** (Romans 8:18-19) As Paul says in this same chapter, **"creation GROANS."** 'Groans'... as in PAIN! Pain that we... the church... must help to comfort.

Friends, you and I must be that 'certain place' that others can find rest for their weary souls. That safe haven for others to bring their burdens... burdens we make lighter by carrying them up to the Throne of Grace. And in turn, bring 'showers of blessing' on those who are hurting. We need to reassure other weary travelers of the promises of the God we serve, and the Lord we love: **"Know that I am with you... I will not leave you."** (Gen. 28:15) God's promises... and OURS!

May you and I be a living testimony to Paul's assessment that **"the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed."** (Romans 8:18) 'Pie in the sky?' NO. 'Standing on the Promises.' 'Trust in the Lord.' To live by those words of ancient wisdom in Proverbs: **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."** (Prov. 3:5-6)

As you and I acknowledge God in all our ways... as we seek to be led by His Spirit... we show ourselves to be **"children of God."** Children who affirm Paul's truth... **"For in hope we are saved."** (Romans 8:24-25) **Trust in the Lord... for in hope we are saved.** That's what it means to be the church. Both as a **place**... and as a **people**. And may all of my fellow adopted children say, 'AMEN!'

CHARGE: When **Jesus called** one of the 12 **disciples**, Nathaniel, Nathaniel was amazed that **Jesus knew** the type of **person** he was merely by seeing him sitting under a fig tree. And when Nathaniel **professed his faith** that Jesus was truly the Son of God, Jesus declared that this disciple would ***“see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*** (*John 1:51*) The very same image we read about with the ancient God-follower Jacob. And in the same way that Christ recognized the gifts of those first disciples, so too does He know YOUR gifts for ministry. Jesus knows what YOU can be... one who professes faith... will see heaven... be blessed by the angels... and will be a blessing to others. Know that as you go out share the HOPE of Christ to those who are suffering, you do not go on this journey alone. That the Spirit of the living God...