

Jacob's Ladder: Stairway to Heaven
Genesis 28:10-22
July 20, 2008

A pious but crabby old lady was greatly annoyed because her neighbors forgot to ask her to go on their picnic. On the morning of the event they suddenly realized their offense and sent a little boy to ask her to come along. "It's too late now," she snapped. "I've already prayed for rain."

Two young boys were spending the night at their grandparents' home the week before Christmas. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside their beds to say their prayers when the youngest one began praying at the top of his lungs: "I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE....I PRAY FOR A NEW PLAYSTATION...I PRAY FOR A NEW BASEBALL GLOVE...."

The older brother leaned over and nudged the younger brother and said, "Why are you shouting your prayers? God isn't deaf."

To which the little brother replied, "No, but Grandma is!"

These prayers sound similar to Jacob's prayer at the end of the passage. Even after God has extended the promise of land, descendants, blessings, and God's abiding presence, Jacob continues to bargain with God. Jacob is a man on the run, a fugitive. His brother, Esau, is on the hunt, wanting to kill Jacob for stealing Esau's birthright. God may be with Jacob, but Esau wants to be done with Jacob. Perhaps his guilt complex prevents him from accepting God's promise and assurance of God's presence. Or it may simply be his conniving, deceptive nature which wants to make sure that he gets his fair share or more out of any deal.

Jacob seems to have a vision of climbing the ladder of success. He wants to make sure that his future is secure and he takes steps to pad it with any cushioning he can get, even from God. The vow he makes to God is conditional. "If God will be with me and grant me upward mobility and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, then the Lord shall be my God, and I'll give God a tenth of what I own." It seems that God has the heavier load to provide. God has to prove himself first, and then, and only then, will Jacob give a tenth of his wealth to God.

Sometimes we are like Jacob and our prayers are self-centered instead of God-centered. They're motivated only by what we want instead of by a desire to find what God wants.

A British author composed some spoofs on prayers that challenge us to examine our own prayer lives. One for the new year is: *We are quite ready to admit that we have on occasion failed to live up to our highest standards, and we shall try to do a bit better in the new year.*ⁱ

Here's a prayer of confession (sort of): *We have done wrong, but we hope nobody will find out.*

A prayer for before the sermon: *O God, I hope the sermon doesn't last more than 15 minutes.*

A prayer for mercy: *O Lord, if I can get away with it this time, I promise I'll never steal again.*

Here's the prayer of a man about to be married: *May she be always useful and always beautiful, full of interesting conversation, witty in private and sparkling in public, blind to my faults, tolerant with my follies, never weary, never demanding, enjoying her own company when*

necessary, not getting too involved with female friends, performing miracles with her housekeeping allowance, and always grateful that I married her.

I trust that our prayers are not quite so self-centered. These examples remind us that the true purpose of prayer is to be molded and shaped as God desires. Prayer is meant to be two-way communication, listening to God and responding to what we hear. Biblical scholars agree that the image of given by God in Jacob's dream is not of a typical ladder leading to the heavenly heights. The image is probably more like a stairway or ramp typical of the ziggurat, a pyramid structure with outside staircases. In Jacob's dreams the angels of God are ascending and descending on the rising structure. Angels are messengers of God. Although this is not literally how I believe prayer works, the image offers the idea that ascending angels carry the needs of humans to God and the angels descending from heaven carry messages of comfort, healing, hope, and challenge from the heavenly heights to humans on earth. The messages sent from God are not necessarily exactly what we want to hear, but we can trust that they are what we need to hear.

Perhaps the most meaningful part of God's message to Jacob for us is this: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go...; I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (28:15). God promises to keep us wherever we go. To keep means to guard, to give heed to, to watch over. This promise is repeated frequently throughout the scriptures. Psalm 121 says, "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand....The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore" (Ps. 121:5, 7-8). Being "kept by God" means being connected to the very life of God. We are held in God's loving embrace no matter what the circumstances of life.

John Westerhoff suggested that one of the most important questions a Christian can ask on a regular basis is, "Where is God in all of this?" That question typically arises in the face of tragedy, but asking it on a daily basis helps us see how God is keeping us and with us. Oftentimes people look at their lives and see nothing but a barren landscape, full of harsh realities. The presence of God may not be immediately evident, but surely God is not absent, either. Jacob found himself in the midst of nowhere fleeing from sin toward an uncertain future. Even in his bleak circumstances, God appeared to him in a dream. He was able to affirm, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

This realization evoked both awe and fear for Jacob. The presence of God can be comforting as well as frightening. Once we become aware of God's presence we can no longer hide. There is no escape. God knows us through and through, and yet God calls us by name. God recognizes our anxiety, our weakness, and God continues to keep us. Our acceptance of God's presence with us enlivens us; it quickens our faith. Like Jacob, it stirs us to make a remembrance of this holy moment and this holy place. In such holy moments we find ourselves on that stairway in Jacob's dream, approaching the very presence of God, participating in the life of God.

"Prayer is like having a date with God," says Trappist monk and author Thomas Keating. "Regular periods of prayer let us get acquainted with Christ and God, not unlike the way we might phone someone who has impressed us or attracted us to their goodness. It's the same way in forming a relationship with God. We have to hang out together."

Kathleen Norris suggests that “Prayer is not doing, but being. It is not words but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself. It is an invitation to recognize holiness, and to utter simple words – ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ - in response. Attentiveness is all; I sometimes think of prayer as a certain quality of attention that comes upon me when I’m busy doing something else. When a person - friend or foe - suddenly comes to mind, I take it as a sign to pray for him. I know several pastors who use their daily jogging run in order to pray for all the members of their churches, lingering over each name. ‘Just saying the name can be a prayer,’ one said to me, ‘because if I don’t know what that person needs, I can be certain that God does.’”ⁱⁱ

Jacob’s ladder is a stairway into the holy presence of God. Prayer is a stairway into the holy presence of God. As one spiritual guide suggests, “The end of prayer is not to win concessions from Almighty Power, but to have communion with Almighty Love.”ⁱⁱⁱ May your prayer lead you into the presence of God, where you are assured that you are kept in Almighty Love.

ⁱ Head, David, *He Sent Leanness: A Book of Prayers for the Natural Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 350.

ⁱⁱⁱ Percy C. Ainsworth, *Weavings*, Vol. 22, No. 4, July/August 2007, p. 23.