

“God Bless You”

Genesis 28:10-19a

First Presbyterian Church
July 19, 2020

All the wild world is beautiful, and it matters but little where we go, to highlands or lowlands, woods or plains, on the sea or land or down among the crystals of waves, or high in a balloon in the sky; through all the climates, hot or cold, storms and calms, everywhere and always we are in God's eternal beauty and love. So universally true is this, (that) the spot where we chance to be always seems the best. Oh, to live life like that – knowing that wherever we are is the best place to be, because truly, God is in that place.

The words I read are John Muir's, taken from *“John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir.”*¹ And then there's this from our spiritual ancestor Jacob: *“How awesome is this place! This is no other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

Clearly John Muir was tapping into the same Spirit that Jacob encountered and embraced on his journey from Beersheba to Haran. Interestingly, Jacob was running away when the Spirit of the Lord came to him in a dream. Jacob had used deceit and trickery to steal his brother Esau's birthright. And here, we have the Lord assuring him he will indeed fulfill that birthright, through the promise God made to his grandfather Abraham.

As we heard in the New Testament passage Elizabeth read from Abraham “descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’” This is the same thing God is saying to Jacob in our Old Testament passage from Genesis, that Jacob's “offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in (him) and in (his) offspring.”

People, we are that offspring! God is saying to us today that all families of the earth shall be blessed through us. How do you like that? Think about it. You as a blessing to all people - friendship and foe, loved one and stranger.

When Jacob heard this, well you can imagine what might have gone through his mind. Relief that God was not punishing him for tricking his father and cheating his brother. And also, maybe pressure and hesitation under the weight of such huge expectations, that he will be the one to step up and do what's necessary in fulfilling God's will, in being a witness and leader to others.

¹ John Muir, taken from *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. Linnie Marsh Wolfe (1938, reprinted by University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 299.

He also might have felt a little unworthy that he and his offspring would be the ones by which God would bring blessings to earth. That's a tall order for anyone. It's a tall order for you, and for you, and for you, and for me. And yet, as followers of Christ, we are brought by Jesus into the spiritual family of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. We are the ones – you are the one – through whom God is seeking to bless all the families of the earth, friends and foe, loved one and stranger.

And so maybe some of us – maybe all of us – are feeling the same way Jacob must have felt – unworthy to be instrumental in God's blessing, pressured and hesitant to take on such a calling, and – for those with reason to feel unworthy, which is all of – maybe even a little relieved knowing that God forgives our misdeeds and raises us up as better than we know ourselves to be, not for our sake, but for the sake of this and future generations.

In fact, if you are sitting there thinking to yourself, "I'm no use to God," look at how God used Jacob, even after he cheated to get ahead. If you're sitting there thinking I'm not strong enough or smart enough, look at the way God turned Jacob's weakness to inner strength, Jacob's foolishness to inner wisdom.

And if you're thinking I'm not worthy, look at Jacob with whom God planted the biggest dream imaginable – a time of global and everlasting blessing, blessing for all people of the earth, blessing that is being planted and nurtured even now by the Spirit of Christ working within you.

Now, all that being said, it's one thing to hear and believe. It's quite another to accept and do. Wouldn't it be easier doing what God desires of us if only God would visit us like he did Jacob, through a dream, assuring us that we are part of God's plan, that we do have what it takes. Wouldn't that make it easier to do what God is calling you to.

If only God would visit you in a dream – visit me – and give us the clarity to know what it all means, how it will all work out. After all, we can't always be certain that our hopes and dreams are in keeping with God's purpose and desire, and we're pretty sure our thoughts and actions aren't always pleasing to God.

Take for instance the woman who dreamed her husband gave her a pearl necklace for their anniversary. When she woke and told him about it, she asked him, "What do you think it means?" The husband smiled and said, "You'll know tonight, dear." That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. Delighted, she opened it, and inside was a book titled "The Meaning of Dreams." "You'll know tonight, dear." Well, I don't need God to tell me what that means for the husband. Not good.

Thankfully, God doesn't regularly use our nightly dreams to communicate to us. No, God reveals our destiny – our calling in life – through the person and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

In Christ, anything we have done that would keep us from being a blessing to others is forgiven, when we turn to Jesus in repentance. In Christ, the misguided strength and wisdom of this world is destined to fall, as those who know and embrace God's word are raised up. As it says in 1 Corinthians 1, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (v. 25)

So the only question for us – for you – is who or what will you trust? Who or what will you follow? And from whom or from what do you seek courage, discernment, and acceptance. Those who turn to the Lord in their weakness, God builds up as a blessing for all. Those who turn to the Lord amid their foolishness, the Spirit guides toward wise decisions. Those who turn to the Lord in repentance, God places on the pathway of right-living.

And yet, how is that we discover and stay on the path of right living, how is it that we tap into and follow Godly discernment, how is it that we have and draw upon divine strength. We do that by doing what Jacob did. After being inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, Genesis tells us that "Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!'"

Here, Jacob is proclaiming God's presence in his life, and confessing he didn't even know it. Proclamation and confession – that's what we do here in church. Then Genesis tells us that Jacob "was afraid. Having fear of the Lord in the Bible means being faithful; it means respecting and following God's will. Then Jacob declared with loud adoration, "How awesome is this place!" Jacob is celebrating God and worshiping the Lord, which is what we do here in church.

The next thing Jacob does, says Genesis, is he takes "the stone that he had put under his head and (sets) it up for a pillar and (pours) oil on the top of it." In other words, he consecrates the stone as sacred and marks that place as holy, which we do here at church, holding this sanctuary as sacred in our hearts.

Finally, Genesis tells us that Jacob did one last thing there. Before he left, "He called that place Bethel," which means the House of God. Jacob participates in God's creative work by building up the House of God, both spiritually and physically.

And that is what we are called to do as those adopted through Christ into the line of Jacob and his father Isaac and his father's father Abraham.

We are to declare God's almighty presence in our lives and in this world. We are to celebrate and worship the Lord, inviting others alongside us. And we are to be Spirit-filled instruments of God's blessing, made possible with us only by the wisdom and the strength of the Lord. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Instill in us a desire to be present to others, to listen to those you bring our way.

Help us to listen with open hearts and open minds, that others might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace.

Free us from the tendency to label people and ideas, and allow us instead to lean into mercy and kindness.

Lord, we pray for your kind and merciful presence among those who need you most, and especially for all those we hold in our hearts at this time.

We pray knowing the promise of Jesus and believing in a God who loves and cares for, who sent Jesus as an expression of that love and care, and who binds us together in prayer at this time, using the words the Lord taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**