

Stairway to Heaven

Rev. Daniel Hayward

Wall Street United Church

Sunday, July 19th, 2026

Genesis 28:10-19, NRSV

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and laid down. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you 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 you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Many of us have been preoccupied, entranced, with the World Cup for the last five weeks. It has had everything, exuberance alternating with heartbreak. As one sports show used to say, "*the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.*" There have been controversies, unbelievable comebacks, even political goings-on. Better than anything else on TV, or so a lot of us think! The Bible has all of this too, and more, and soccer had not even been invented when the scriptures were written! We read today from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, which has it all — highs and lows, triumphs against the odds, ethical dilemmas, war stories and adventure tales, political machinations, and poetic explorations of all the emotions. It's all there,

but a lot of the time the Biblical characters are at home, loving and arguing and coping with crises.

The Hebrew Scriptures excel at family drama. It's kind of like *'Days of Our Lives'*, or *'The Young and the Restless'*. I mentioned those soap operas when I was preaching elsewhere, and quickly had to add, in case my references were completely out of date, I have no idea if these soap operas are still on TV! My mother and grandmother and wife watched *'Another World'*, which I am sure was cancelled years ago. My wife now watches *'The Bold and the Beautiful'*. I looked it up: it has been on for 39 years, and you can tell, because the characters have been married to each other multiple times! (I guess when you have been writing for the same show since 1987 you just may be running out of ideas!)

We have a real drama today, one that could have come from one of these shows. And this drama, in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, has a whole backstory. So I should do what a lot of TV shows do, and give you the “previously in the Book of Genesis” recap.

Sarah and Abraham, great figures of the Bible, come from a distant country. They have a son, Isaac. There is a lot of drama to get to that part, but we're just doing the recap here. Isaac grows up, and he and Rebekah have twin sons, Esau and Jacob, who are always competing with each other. (I'm glad this story is set in ancient times, as you never see siblings competing anymore. Never happens 😊!)

Esau is a hunter, always outdoors, and Isaac loves him the most. Jacob is quiet and prefers the indoors, and his mother Rebekah loves *him* best. So you can see this is only going to ramp up the competition. Esau marries, but his parents are not exactly fond of their daughter-in-law. So far this is sounding like some families I could name. I have made pastoral visits to these people.

So, long story short, Jacob is egged on by his mother Rebekah to cheat his brother Esau out of Isaac's blessing. I told you before that this family could be in a soap opera, and now the drama is really heating up.

Back then the father's blessing was important because it was seen as conferring power and prestige. So Rebekah wants it for her favourite son Jacob, and not for

his brother. But Esau is the firstborn, by a few minutes, and tradition says that he deserves the blessing, and he is Isaac's favourite. So it is necessary to fool Isaac into blessing Jacob. Esau is out hunting to get meat for his dad. While he is gone Rebekah gets Jacob to bring Isaac his favourite meal, and to put on Esau's clothes, and to put goatskin on his hands and neck so he will feel hairy like his brother. Isaac, old and nearly blind, is suspicious but gets taken in by the disguise. (He actually holds out longer than I would have — Jacob wouldn't have had to go to such lengths for me, I would have caved in with just the favourite meal — *"This seems shady, but there's a casserole, so fine!"*) But Isaac is finally convinced and blesses Jacob.

There is more that you can read in Genesis, but let's just say that when Esau finds out about this, he is, to put it mildly, ticked right off, and wants to kill his brother. So the parents tell Jacob to get out of town for a while, at least until Esau can calm down. Jacob is told to go to stay with his uncle, and marry one of his cousins.

All this is the background to where we picked up the action in our reading this morning. Jacob heads out. He travels some distance, and you have to wonder about what he thought about on his journey. Did he regret what he did? Did he worry about his mother, or his dying father whom he had tricked during what were likely the last days of his life? Would he ever see his parents again? Was getting his father's blessing worth it? Maybe he is tempted to go back, hoping his brother will not follow through on his threats. Maybe he thinks of walking away from his dysfunctional family completely, them *and* their God. Even if the blessing worked out, this wasn't a great way to start.

Jacob stops for the night, and thinks about these things, and falls asleep with a stone under his head, which sounds very uncomfortable. (1/10, would not recommend! The Hebrew wording may mean that the stone was beside his head, so maybe Jacob had one of those travel pillows for the car.)

And Jacob dreams that he sees a ladder, or staircase, or ramp, reaching to heaven, and angels going up and down on it. The Hebrew word is translated as "ladder" in several Bibles, including the King James that some of us grew up with. There is an old spiritual — some of us may have learned this at camp, way back when — called *"We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder."* Quilters here may know that there is a quilt

block pattern called Jacob's Ladder, which represents flying geese and is meant to symbolize the flight by escaped slaves north to freedom in Canada.

In other Bibles this Hebrew word isn't translated as *ladder*, but as *stairway*. Stairway to Heaven! People in my generation think of the last song at high school dances, Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' – "*there's a lady who's sure, all that glitters is gold, and she's buying a stairway to heaven.*" This is a long song, eight minutes long! It's a slow dance until the end, and then you knew how much the person you were dancing with liked you if they kept dancing slow when the song's tempo became faster.

And this dream doesn't have only the stairway to heaven. That would be sufficiently awesome. But God speaks to Jacob in the dream, and makes promises to him, that he and his descendants will be given this land, and that God will be with him wherever he may go. And when Jacob wakes up, he says "*Surely God is in this place, and I didn't know it. This is the house of God, the gate of heaven.*" He calls the place Bethel, which means house of God. If you drive on Centennial Road which becomes County Road 26 and go through Bethel, now you know! Jacob takes the stone he used for a pillow, pours oil over it to mark it – and then he continues on his way.

There's something shocking in this story, at least for our culture. After all the soap opera antics that went on, after all of Jacob's conniving with his mother, after all his deceit, *God speaks to Jacob*. God doesn't speak from somewhere up there, but right beside him in the dream. This is the really shocking part. In the most unlikely place, a desert where Jacob sleeps with a rock for a pillow, God tells the most unlikely person, Jacob, that the promises made to Abraham his grandfather and Isaac his father will be continued through him, even though he has been a trickster, and a liar. God tells Jacob in the dream, "*In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.*"

We have to admit, hearing the whole story of the twin brothers and their parents, that Jacob's motives are pretty unsavoury. Maybe he reminds us of ourselves. That Biblical commandment about not bearing false witness can be one of the hardest commandments to keep. There's a movie, '*Liar Liar*', and in it Jim Carrey can't lie

for 24 hours. Watching what happens makes you realize how much we stretch the truth every day in our dealings and conversations!

And, yet, this story and other Biblical stories where God uses imperfect people, like Jacob and the rest of his family, give us hope. Jacob's dream gives us hope that our less than ideal motives may not be a dead end. The wrong things we do, and the right things we don't do, can be a starting place, as they are for Jacob. The dream allows him to put aside all the broken relationships and the deceit and stealing that broke them in the first place — all the dysfunction that seems to characterize his family, all the guilt and remorse that must be tearing at him after all he has done. God redirects him. Jacob doesn't keep cheating. He is given a new start, a new direction. And he keeps on traveling, and the story of this family goes on, and Jacob and Esau reconcile. Jacob, deceitful Jacob, even gets a new name from God: *Israel*. And he is indeed the ancestor of God's people. He is in the family trees the Bible gives for Jesus.

That old spiritual I mentioned is *We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, but in Jacob's dream he never climbs the ladder! Angels go up and down on it, bringing God's grace to him. To quote Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*, it makes me wonder, because I remember someone saying that the good news in this story isn't Jacob's commitment — it's God's. God is committed even to a trickster like Jacob. Before Jacob takes any steps toward God, God takes a step toward him. And God keeps the promise, to Jacob, and to us. To us. "*I am with you and will keep you wherever you go*," God says. "*For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*." We are going to sing a song at the end of our service today called '**Goodness of God**', and we will sing, "*all my life you have been faithful, and all my life you have been so, so good!*" That's what this story, of God's faithfulness, and commitment and love, is all about.

And remember how Jacob responds to God's promise? He says, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Where else has God been, and we did not know it? Anywhere. Everywhere! Everywhere we meet God, everywhere we receive God's promise to be with us and not to leave us, that place — not just this place — is the house of God. It is Bethel. It

is the gate of heaven. We just have to recognize it. And there we can recognize that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is not just the God of long-ago biblical characters. God is our God. God comes to us. God commits to us. God makes promises, to us.

In that Stairway to Heaven song, Led Zeppelin sang,
*"Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run
There's still time to change the road you're on."*

There is still time to change the road we're on. The question for us today, friends, is this: can we lift our heads out of our guilt about what we may have done, so that we can experience the dream that sets us on a different path, to a new direction?
Amen! Thanks be to God.