

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: The Rescue Ladder

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

When I was a kid, my dad did the classic dad thing for his kids – headed out into the backyard with a armload of two-by-fours, found a tree with just the right shape to it, and built us a tree house. Only *now*, of course, do I appreciate the hours of labor that he must have put into it – I mean, it was *some* structure – a sturdy deck which he made sure would hold all of us and our friends, and then the *piece de resistance* – a second platform even further up the tree, to which you could scramble even higher. We called it the crow’s nest, and we would send someone up there to keep an eye out for pirates.

Because we actually never thought of it as our tree house – it was our ship – and when we weren’t watching for pirates, we *were* the pirates -- we were the original Black Pearl of the Caribbean. And to get into this ship, there was a rope ladder hanging off the side, which you could pull up when you wanted to keep others from joining you – and which you could drop down into the waves to rescue passing sailors or mermaids. That rope was called a “Jacob’s Ladder,” which is indeed what those ladders are called, the ones that can be dropped down the sides of ships so that someone can scramble up, up to the safety and welcome of the ship’s deck.

So we would lean over the side of our tree ship and call out to imaginary folks in need of rescue and drop the ladder down to them to save them from a watery demise. The Jacob’s Ladder.

And of course what we called that ladder, the one that gets dropped down to pull folks up, all comes from this story, this famed story that Walt read to you, the story of Jacob and his dream. Two weeks ago we looked at a scripture that comes much later in Jacob’s life, the story of a nighttime encounter with an angel with whom he wrestles. But *this* story is from early on, when Jacob is younger, maybe in his twenties, maybe earlier, young and alone and afraid. He has a right to feel alone – he’s just cheated his twin brother Esau out of his dad’s inheritance, and there’s pretty much no one in his family that wants

anything to do with him anymore, and his father has said “you know, you’re probably better off hitting the road and getting out of here.”

Pretty awful words to hear from your own dad, even if you have been a complete jerk. So Jacob is alone and afraid, and now he’s exhausted, too – it’s late at night, and he can’t keep going. So he falls to the ground to sleep, with just a rock for a pillow. And in his dream, this is what he sees. He sees a ladder. A ladder that appears to have been lowered down to him from heaven, because on that ladder are angels going up and down, up and down, to Jacob and then back up. And he hears a voice, the voice of God, saying, “I am with you. I will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you.”

And when Jacob wakes up, he says “the Lord is in this place? The Lord is in this godforsaken place with me? I didn’t know that. I did not know that.” And the scripture says he was “afraid”, but the truth is our translation don’t really do that word justice – it would be more accurate to say “he was blown away, he was amazed.” More than that – he was *all right*. He was all right after that. God lowered the ladder to him out of heaven, God lowered the ladder down to rescue him, the angels ran down the rungs, and from then on, he knew, Jacob knew: *God is with me. In this godforsaken – and yet NOT godforsaken place – God is with me.*

When I’m working on an Old Testament text, a text that is holy both to Christians and to Jews, I like to read what my Jewish colleagues think about it, what wisdom they can share with me. And one rabbi pointed out something pretty important. It’s not a coincidence, he said, that a ladder is lowered to Jacob when he is at his most alone and afraid. Because often it’s our crisis moments that offer us a second chance to connect to God. Sometimes it’s in our darkest, most alone moments that we suddenly notice the bottom rung of a ladder right beside us, a way out, a way up. It’s as if, the rabbi said, as if God is reassuring Jacob – *that terrible aloneness you are feeling right now may yet lead you to find Me in entirely new ways.* The ladder is lowered to Jacob at his worst moment for a reason.

Last week, at our 8:15 worship service, Gary Rafsky led us thinking about what it means to journey through awful times, where God is in it. And one person among us raised their hand and said, “don’t you think that those terrible times open up a possibility of getting closer to God? when things are great, we just don’t seem to remember that God is right there. But when things are dark, that’s when we’re most open to connecting with God.” That’s the story of Jacob’s ladder, the rabbi was saying. At the moment when he is most alone and most afraid, a ladder is lowered beside him and angels beckon him to climb and God’s voice whispers, “I am with you. I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go.”

I am with you. I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go.

At this year's Academy Awards, one of the movies nominated for best picture of the year was a film called *127 Hours*. When it first came out, a number of you told me I oughta see it, that it was amazing, inspiring, deeply spiritual. But I also knew that at its premiere several people required medical attention because they fainted dead away, and, frankly, this gave me pause. If you need a reminder, *127 Hours* is the absolutely true story of a rock climber named Aron Ralston who several years back while scrambling through a remote part of the Canyonlands national park in Utah dislodged a large boulder in such a way that, improbably, it rolled down a chasm after him pinned his right arm to the canyon wall and wedged into place, trapping him.

The film takes its name from the 127 hours that Aron spent with his arm slammed under the boulder trying at first to move the rock, then coming to terms with certain death, and then realizing that there *was* a way he could get himself free. A way that would require extraordinary courage and strength, and the use of his pocketknife. I won't give more detail, but suffice it to say that Aron Halton now has a prosthetic right arm. Even with all the people who told me this was a story of inspiration, faith and strength, I didn't think I could bear to watch it.

So I just wasn't going to. Until there I was on a 15 hour plane flight home from India in February, and on the inflight entertainment system on the little screen in front of me, Emirates Airlines told me that they were about to show *127 Hours*. All right, I thought, surely I can handle watching this movie on a screen that's 10 inches wide. And watch it I did. It still wasn't easy. The flight attendant brought me my dinner about half way through the movie, and that didn't go so well. But I'll tell you, I was so thankful to have seen this movie, so thankful. It is a story of strength, and it is a God story.

What it is, really, is a Jacob's Ladder story. There comes a point in the movie, about 3 days in, when Aron Ralston realizes that nobody is going to find him. Time and again he's heard sounds from above him, from the mouth of the canyon, time and again he's thought that any moment there'd be a rope thrown down and a rescuer beside him. And he realizes now that it isn't happening. And he is Jacob, he is alone and afraid. He *is* Jacob, in the dark wilderness, exhausted. And he prays. The words that the actor James Franco spoke in the movie were the exact words that Aron Ralston himself spoke: "*God, I am praying to you for guidance. I'm trapped in BlueJohn Canyon – you probably already know that. And I don't know what I am supposed to do. I need some new ideas.*" That's about a good prayer as I can imagine anyone praying. God, I need some new ideas.

And it's like the end of the ladder is lowered down beside him, it's like the angels make their way down to him. It's like God says to him what God said to Jacob: *I am with you. I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go.* Because Aron Ralston dreams a dream then, too – in his weariness and exhaustion, he dreams a dream and in his dream he sees a little boy – and this is all true, this is what he saw – he sees a little boy, God gives him the vision of a little boy – and he knows it's the child he'll have one day. And when he awakens, then, with strength that none of us can even begin to imagine, he does what he has to do to extricate himself from his trapped and useless arm. And he lives. Last year, he became the father of a little boy, Leo.

Now, the bottom of a canyon isn't where any of us are likely to find ourselves. At least, not a real canyon. But our own canyons? Our own places of dark shadows? We sure enough find ourselves in those. Our own little chasms where we get ourselves trapped? Sure, we got those. And *those* are the places into which God lowers the ladder. Those are the places into which the angels step. Because it *is* true what the rabbi said, it is true what my friend said here last Sunday, that our crisis moments that offer us a second chance to connect to God. That it is in our darkest, most alone moments that we suddenly notice the end of a ladder lowered down beside us, a way out, a way up.

I am with you, whispers God. *I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go.*

Earlier this morning I led our 8:15 worship service. We closed our service with the spiritual that I grew up being taught, *We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder*. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder," the words say, "Children of the Lord. Every rung gets higher, higher. Every new rung makes us stronger, Children of the Lord." I grew up knowing the words, yes, but I didn't know the dark canyons out of which that song came, the darkness of slavery that gave birth to this song of hope, the people alone and afraid who sang of finding the strength. The people trapped in darkest chasms of human hurt and isolation, who sang of a ladder where angels beckoned who sang of a God who spoke to them just as he'd spoken to Jacob: *I am with you. I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go.*

Jacob dreamed his dream thousands of years ago. But it is still our truth. When it is darkest and we are most alone, when we are uncertain and most afraid, then God lowers the ladder to us and the angels beckon and say 'this way, *this way is strength.*'

I am with you, God says. I am with you. I will not leave you. I will keep you wherever you go. *Amen.*