

**Jacob's Ladder**  
**Genesis 28:10-19**  
**January 19 2020**

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 pièce 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 Pirates of the Caribbean.

And to get into this ship, my dad had attached a rope ladder hanging off the side,

which you could pull up when you set sail, and which you could drop down into the waves to rescue passing sailors or mermaids.

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, we called it.

Because that's what *real* sailors call that ladder, and we were real sailors.

And of course what we called that rescue ladder, what ships still call that ladder, comes from this story, this story from Genesis that you just heard, the story of Jacob and his dream about a ladder.

Jacob goes on, later in Genesis, to become one the great patriarchs of the faith,

but in this story, Jacob's pretty young,  
and he's away from home, out in the middle of nowhere,  
alone and scared.

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 worn out, too – it's late at night, and he can't keep going.

So he curls up on the ground, with a stone for his pillow, and he sleeps the sleep of the exhausted. And he dreams.

He dreams of a ladder,

a ladder lowered down to him from heaven,

and on that ladder angels going up and down,

touching the earth beside him, then dancing back up the rungs to heaven.

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 no longer afraid.

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.

Years ago, I read an explanation of this story written by a Jewish rabbi.  
He 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 in truth it's our crisis moments that offer us a chance to connect to  
God.

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 in those times that God drops down a rescue ladder.

Just before Christmas, at our high school youth group, SPF,  
we spent an evening just talking together about faith,  
about what we believe and what we're not sure of,  
about when we feel close to God and when not.

And one of the kids said,

“isn't it funny how, like, when things are really good, you don't think about  
God?

Like you don't really need God?

It seems like the times you get closest to God when things are really terrible.  
I mean, those are the times when I really start praying.”

In other words, she was saying,

When things are great, we maybe don't 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 Jacob 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.

There's a children's song that I grew up being taught in Sunday School,  
 and maybe some of you did, too.

*We are Climbing Jacob's ladder.*

We used to sing it all the time,  
 at Sunday School and church camp, too.

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.

A fun kids' song, that's how I knew it.

I didn't know the dark history from which that song came.

I didn't know until much later that it was the darkness of slavery that gave  
 birth to this song of hope.

It was oppressed people alone and afraid  
 who sang of finding the strength to endure.

It was slaves and the children of slaves who were singing of a God who was  
 with them in their place of hurt.

The people trapped in darkest chasms of human injustice

sang of a ladder where angels beckoned

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.

On this Martin Luther King weekend,  
 we are remembering a man who worked to lead his people  
 out of that darkness of oppression,

who preached a God of strength and presence.

But there was a time when Martin Luther King himself needed to be reminded of God's nearness.

He himself had need of that rescue ladder.

It was 1955.

The bus boycotts were underway in Montgomery Alabama, and the threat of a violent backlash was growing.

And late one night the phone rang at Dr. King's house, and when he picked it up, he heard a man's voice say:

"We've taken all we want to take from you, you [*N-word*]. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery."

And this is what happened next, as Dr. King wrote it, later:

*It seemed that all my fears had come down on me at once.*

*I had reached the saturation point.*

*I was ready to give up.*

*I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward.*

*In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone,*

*I decided to take my problem to God.*

*With my head in my hands,*

*I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.*

*The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.*

*"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right.*

*But now I am afraid.*

*The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter.*

*I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left.*

*I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."*

At that moment, King said,

*I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before.*

*It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying:  
"Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever."  
Almost at once my fears began to go.  
My uncertainty disappeared.  
I was ready to face anything."*

Into that place of loneliness and fear,  
into the same wilderness of abandonment that Jacob had felt,  
God dropped a rescue ladder to Dr. King.  
I am with you, God said,  
just as God had said to Jacob.  
Now and forever, I am with you.

We will not likely find ourselves facing into what Martin Luther King faced  
into,  
that great darkness of deepest fear.

But our lives, each of our lives, take us into places of wilderness,  
and into times of lonely doubt.  
We have our own dark places,  
our own dark nights of the soul.

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,  
that our crisis moments 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.*

Just one last story.

Earlier this month,

I stood in front of a group of clergy in the town of Khammam, India.

As part of our annual visit to our charitable work in India,

I'm always asked to visit with the pastors there, and offer some inspiring words.

It always feels a little backward to me, to tell the truth –

**they** are the ones who inspire **me** –

they are the ones who are taking themselves into rural villages to share the story of Jesus to people who are often indifferent or even hostile to that story.

These pastors work for very little,

and there are no steepled white church on the hill for them.

So, yes, for me to stand before them and inspire seems odd;

I am in awe of them – and I tell them that each year.

But, because they ask, I do my best to inspire.

And this year, just a couple weeks ago now,

I talked about this story, this story of Jacob and his rescue ladder.

I mentioned the floods that India had recently endured,

and the pictures we'd all seen of helicopters dropping rescue ladders down to stranded villagers.

God is like that, I said –

God drops a ladder down to Jacob when he most needs it.

God drops a ladder to us when we most need it.

And one young woman, a young woman pastor,

got up and she began to weep.

And of course, the language barrier being what it is,

I had to wait until someone translated before I knew what she was saying.

What she was saying was that she had never thought of the story that way,

and that she was thinking now of all the times God had sent a ladder to her to pull her from the waves.

And then she said that all she wanted to do now

was to be the one who dropped the ladder down

to others who were hurting.

So that they, too would know the truth that she now knows:

That God is with us in our darkness.

I don't know what darkneses that young woman pastor has already lived through.

But I know that she has come through them because of a God who never left her.

A God who never leaves any one of us.

And I know, that by her ministry,

others will now come to know that, too.

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.*