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Sermon Title: Call Me Ishmael
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19

Genesis 28:10-19

Jacob left Beersheba 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 lay down in that place. 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.

During the infamous "government shutdown" a couple of weeks ago, the Republicans in the House of Representatives opened a special meeting of their caucus in the House with a spontaneous group sing of "Amazing Grace." What were they thinking? I don't mean that as a joke or a criticism, I really do mean, "What were they thinking?"

America is a nation of 335 million people. What do our 335 million people know about "Amazing Grace"? That it's a popular funeral hymn? That it was written by a remorseful former slave trader, "amazed" that God would still love him and forgive him after destroying so many lives? Did they choose it for the third phrase, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me"? — was it sort of self-deprecating humor? Did they choose it for the rest of the first verse as an admission of guilt? "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see"? Or did they see the final verse, where it says, "When we've been there 10,000 years," as an editorial comment on the endlessness of political theater?

I'm heading into the territory of irony or sarcasm, but the question is legitimate: What were they thinking? And what did they think we were thinking about a hymn so central to Christian thinking? Were they counting on us to be "Biblically literate" enough, theologically literate, church literate, to make sense of their hymn singing? Maybe they just ALL realized that ALL of us and ALL of them, we ALL need grace, God's unconditional love.

From President Obama to Senator Ted Cruz and everyone in between, we are all "wretches." We all need "Amazing Grace" Let me tell you what I think about those politicians, and it might surprise you. I don't think it was "showmanship," or "one-upmanship" or "holier than thou." I think it was a touchstone, a remembrance that for a few brief moments took folks to a better place IF we know the Bible.

For all of this year, and probably next, our church is focused on "Biblical literacy." Part of a larger goal of "religious literacy." In other words, knowing enough about your religious stuff to make sense of it all when it appears all around us.

Some years ago, I took a group of high school youth to Harvard. I called up the Harvard Christian Fellowship and asked them to provide two students who could talk to my young people. I figured it was a good way to prep my youth for college. I figured they'd say things like, "Study hard, do your homework, take some tough courses, take an SAT prep course," that sort of thing. And they did! The Harvard kids were great, very enthusiastic, upbeat, hip, motivational.

But here was their big surprise. They told my kids, "Know your Bible. Know your Bible because when you get to college, it's too late!" They went on to explain that when you get to college, you're going to meet all kinds of people who will turn and twist and use the Bible — other students, professors, student groups, off-campus influences — all quoting the Bible this way and that, claiming this and that, promoting this and that. And if you

don't know the Bible, how are you going to know what's legit and what isn't? What's true and what isn't?

You don't have to be a freshman in college to run into that. Go on the Internet, open your newspaper. Listen to talk radio. Go to the movies. Watch the evening news. Or, talk with coworkers, neighbors, friends. All over the place, people will claim to know *your* Bible. Do they? Do you? Do you know enough?

Out in Kansas there's this awful church, the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, a place filled with hate for gay people and for America. They show up at funerals of U.S. soldiers and celebrate their death as evidence of God's punishment of America for America's embrace of gays. Now they've announced a plan to show up at the World Series, once in Boston, once in St. Louis, to mock the Red Sox and Cardinals for being nice. And all that hatred is rooted in their take on our Bible.

That's their right. Our right is to know the Bible well enough to know if they're right. Lo and behold, as we are wandering through the Bible in search of Biblical literacy, this very week we came to the legendary story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis, chapters 18 and 19. Two ancient cities destroyed by God because ... because why?

The Bible actually tells us why. We didn't have to guess. In the Book of Ezekiel, God's great prophet tells us, "The sin of Sodom was that they were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things." (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

Why isn't Westboro Baptist Church out there mocking the "arrogant" and "haughty," protesting the "unconcerned" who "do not help the poor and needy"? I think either they don't know the Bible, or they think we don't know the Bible. That's just one handy, current example of the need for us to be "Biblically literate."

To become "Biblically literate," our Bible Study has been looking for those stories and people and verses that we should all know. We're only two months into it, only half-way through Genesis. But we're becoming literate already! We've come upon John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Bill Cosby's "Noah and the Flood," everybody's Adam and Eve, the mysterious "Mark of Cain," and and the haunting "Am I my brother's keeper?" The warnings of "entertaining angels unaware," *Moby Dick's* "Call Me Ishmael," the original "Rainbow" symbolism, and the sad, sad roots of today's Middle East Israel/Palestine Arab Muslim/Jew/Christian mess.

These stories, whether you believe them to be great truths, great facts, or great myths, they tell us the beginning of humanity and civilization and religion, as people try to understand their relationship with God and with one another. It's all quite amazing, really, and instructive.

We've seen that the BEST of people are weak and stumbling just like us; the WORST of people have no idea what they're doing, just as Jesus said on the cross; the times are troubled, just like today. And yet, there was laughter and miracle and forgiveness and life and love. In short, the Bible is us.

A lot of people look at those stories and make fun of them and make fun of those of us who believe them in any way. Snakes feeding apples to Adam and Eve. Great floods destroying everything but Noah and his two-by-two zoo. A tower built to heaven that turns in to "A Tower of Babble (Babel)." Rainbow promises and talking angels. But let's face it, everything has a beginning. There was a first time when somebody did something he shouldn't do, and he knew it; when somebody was bad, and others knew it; when somebody hurt somebody else, and it was wrong, and everybody knew it. And people began to wonder HOW they knew it!

And there was the first time there was a cyclone, a hurricane, a flood, and all was lost ... except for some. And people began to wonder why. And they began to think about a "higher power," a "force greater than themselves," a "Creator." God. And they began to think there was a connection between what you should do and what you shouldn't and that there are consequences for both. And before you know it, you have stories and then a collection of stories. The Bible. And lessons to be learned from stories. Religion. And a place for religion. Church. And here we are. Which leads me to ask, do we still have stories to tell, stories worth knowing?

I'll give you another example. As we wander through the Bible looking for the basics, we should highlight to be "Biblically literate." We've spent some time with good old Abraham. Abraham is the founder of Israel, the founder of Judaism. He is the spiritual root of Christianity and Islam. And believe you me, he was a piece of work. Abraham is enough to make you think if HE can get into heaven, anyone can get into heaven!

Let's see. He is incredibly bold and very wimpy. He is blindly obedient and a liar. He is visionary and selfish. He is loving and cruel. He is faithful and faithless. He is courageous and scared. He is absolutely torn between God and family.

Art McCain brought me a cartoon from the *New Yorker* that perfectly represents the bipolar Abraham AND "Biblical literacy." I wanted to print it in

your bulletin, but Alida and Marcia vetoed it, saying it was too violent, so don't tell them I'm telling you about it. Here's the PG version. Abraham is about to be bad to his family because he THINKS God wants him to. So he's conflicted, and with exasperation, he says to God, "Must I sacrifice family for career?" That's all there is to the cartoon. An old man in a long robe with a scraggly beard, whining to God, "Must I sacrifice family for career?" Good cartoon. Good joke. If you get it. I have to wonder how many *New Yorker* readers know enough Bible to get it. These old, old stories have a lot to teach us, good and bad, but we have to know them.

I'm not trying to guilt-trip you into reading the e-mail Bible Study I send out each week. Follow along with us as we find the stuff we should all know. Then no one can pull the wool over your eyes, not even me!

I don't often spend much time applauding Protestantism or Congregationalism, but I'll tell you this. It was Protestantism 500 years ago and then Congregationalism that emphasized the importance of getting the Bible in your language, in your hands, so you can read it, and you can think it through. That's pretty cool.

So I'll close with one more story, the one Adam read for our Scripture, the one we call "Jacob's Ladder." I'm not going to preach it. It will be our Bible Study topic this week, so I thought it would be fun to hear it today and sing it in a moment. That's how most of us know it, an old, old hymn about an old, old story, about Abraham's grandson Jacob. Jacob is another of those great Biblical figures, a tremendous success and abysmal failure, a conniving cheat and a humble leader; a liar, a manipulator, a polygamist, a good cook, a terrific expert in animal husbandry, and someone quite beloved by God! Another example that there's hope for all of us.

Today's Scripture takes place after Jacob has taken advantage of his elderly father, has cheated on his brother, has torn apart his family, has run away. He's a mess. One night, while on the run, he has a dream, a dream about a ladder that extends from earth to heaven, and on the ladder are angels, and at the top of the ladder is God. And God talks to Jacob, Jacob the bad son, Jacob the evil twin, Jacob the loser, Jacob the family disappointment, Jacob the sinner. And God says to Jacob, "I am with you. I'm not done with you yet. You and I are just beginning. I am with you. I will watch over you. I will bless you. I need you. You and I are going to do great things!"

What made me think of this is my big reunion year is coming up for the prep school I attended, the Northfield Mount Hermon School. As part of the celebration, the cross-country team I was on is being inducted into the school's Hall of Fame. Not me. I was way behind the pack. They're in the

Hall of Fame; I'm just in the locker room somewhere. But they were great, part of an extraordinary tradition, eight or 10 years of being undefeated. One of my teammates was Frank Shorter, the Olympic marathon winner.

As bad as I was, they were great. Why? Well, here's one reason. Each race began with "Jacob's Ladder." That's what we called it. A straight-up hill we had to climb more than run. "Jacob's Ladder." We did it all the time. We did it for fun. We did it on weekends. We did it in the winter. That was the beginning of the race. It broke the other teams. It made us. When the other teams got to the top of Jacob's Ladder, they were done for. When we got to the top, we were just getting started.

And that's what God said to Jacob. In the Bible. And that's why the story of Jacob is still priceless. If we know it.

Let's sing this great old hymn.

"We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"

*We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
Soldiers of the cross.*

*Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
Every round goes higher, higher,
Soldiers of the cross.*

*Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Sinner, do you love my Jesus?
Soldiers of the cross.*

*If you love Him, why not serve Him?
If you love Him, why not serve Him?
If you love Him, why not serve Him?
Soldiers of the cross.*