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Date: February 20, 2022
Sermon: "This and That"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19

Genesis 28:10-19 *Jacob's Dream at Bethel*

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 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.

For today's sermon let's go to the end. After the sermon, after the offering, we'll do an old Gospel hymn, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." You know it from church or glee club:

"We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
we are climbing Jacob's ladder,
we are climbing Jacob's ladder,
soldiers of the Cross."

It's based on that Old Testament Scripture lesson we just heard, a Christianized version. Now we need the backstory to get the full meaning. This whole Judaism, Christianity, Promised Land, Old Testament, New Testament, Messiah,

Jesus thing began when God created a covenant, a bond, with Abraham, whereby God would bless Abraham and his descendants if, if Abraham and his descendants would stay close to God. Our Bible story today takes us into the second and third generation of that deal.

Abraham had two sons, they turned out a mess. One of those sons, Isaac, had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and they turned out a mess. Sibling rivalry, deceit, Mama's boy vs. Daddy's favorite, which led to Jacob's running away to save his skin.

It's during this escape that our Bible story takes place. Using a stone for a pillow he lays down to sleep and has a dream. A dream of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," or what our Gospel song calls "Jacob's Ladder." On the ladder are angels, going up to heaven, coming down from heaven. At the top of the ladder stands God, renewing the promise that Jacob and the people will become great "and bless all the people of the earth." (Genesis 28:14)

Well, Jacob's no dummy. He *is* a jerk, a conniving, deceitful, exploitative, self-centered jerk, but he's no dummy. When he wakes up, he says immediately, "Surely God is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven."

That dream convinced him that God would not let go of him; he was being given a new chance to be God's chosen instrument. Taking God's promise to heart, Jacob set a course for his life that kept his family moving ahead toward becoming that "blessing to all the earth": through Judaism, through the Old Testament, through Jesus, through the New Testament, all the way to our little Church.

When Alida does a funeral over in our Memorial Garden, she tells about Jacob's ladder and the stone pillow and the angels going to and fro from heaven, and in that sacred space of beautiful stones, she invites us to imagine that ladder connecting us to the angels in our lives, the saints in our lives, our loved ones who are gone and yet very much with us.

This story has a connection to today. When Jacob poured oil on his stone pillow, he consecrated it as one of the first physical worship spaces, a place designated with a phrase still popular today when we call a church "the house of God." And when he described that place, and his experiences there, as the "Gate of Heaven," that clicks with a lot of us. The Catholic Church nearest to my house growing up in Queens was called "Gate of Heaven," and the cemetery in Trumbull is "Gate of Heaven Cemetery," the idea that there is a place we can be that's the passing place from this world to the next.

And Jacob's ladder, with its busy passageway of angels going up and down, reminds us that the line between here and there is very thin, very accessible, very busy, and quite full of life. And let's not forget, this old hymn began as a slave-written, slave-sung spiritual, reminding them of God's promise of greatness *and* the arduous journey up the ladder to freedom—always a journey accompanied by angels. You might be wondering where this sermon is going. Well, I don't know. We'll see.

On Wednesday, Alida said to me, "There's going to be nobody in Church on Sunday, a holiday weekend, skiers getting some last skiing in, high-schoolers and parents squeezing in college visits, and sleepy people are going to sleep in late." Even Alida has abandoned our Church. She went off to Tennessee for her Appalachia ASP Board meeting, then on to Indiana to help plan Brigitta's wedding. At least my daughter Cameron and family are in Church before abandoning me—that's our grandson in the chancel this morning—and after Church, they're headed to Massachusetts to do some college visits, and then my daughter is taking her law boards in Boston.

My world is, as my sermon title suggests, "this and that."

Adding to my chaos, Lent begins in two weeks, which means Easter is in nine weeks. In the middle of that, I have—what do they call it—a "significant" birthday. It's not 50, when you're still at the top of your game and the world admires you, your family needs you, and no one yet stops to help you cross the street. It's not 100, when you amaze people just by getting up each day. It's the one in between that leaves people neither amused nor impressed. It just is.

I am the living embodiment of the great Latin phrase (yes, I'm old enough to have studied Latin), "Cogito ergo sum." "I think, therefore I am." So, yes, I'm still thinking, cogitating, writing, speechifying, stringing words together, so I guess I still "am."

On my birthday Sunday in March, I'll be preaching on some other numbers: last October was the 50th anniversary of my ordination, 50 years since the denomination and seminary, churches and pastors got together and decided I was fit to be a pastor. Fit. Trained. Tested. Ready. Willing. And called.

God called me to ministry in 1966, 56 years ago. I started doing it in 1968, and I was ordained to do it in 1971. But next Sunday and on that birthday Sunday, we may look at how I got here, how I got from Point A, a dastardly young man, to Point B, a relatively mellow old man.

I certainly was a bit like Jacob. Both of us an embarrassment to our families, what we used to call "no-good-niks" in our neighborhoods. And, as with Jacob,

God did have to use every trick in the book to get my attention, wake me up, and change the course of my life.

Some people are a little wary of divine intervention, voices, visions, dreams, God-moments when something or someone inexplicably happens or shows up at exactly the right moment. And we wonder whether it was coincidence . . . blind luck . . . or God.

The changing course of one's life, one's conversion, has steps to it. First, there's stuff that lays the groundwork, softens you up, gets you ready, and you don't even know it. Then, quite often, there is some big event, dramatic, shocking to the system, a spiritual, God-sent bolt of lightning that you ignore at your peril.

Then there's the follow-up, something that lets you know you're not imagining things, God really is at work on you. For me, that was Hofstra University. (One of our best high school seniors just got accepted at Hofstra, and boy, did that set me on a trail of memories.)

When I got kicked out of college, no one was shedding any tears over my dismissal. And other colleges wouldn't take me. Only Hofstra, on Long Island, took a chance. And very quickly it was clear if God really did want me, then Hofstra was God's proof that there was a way forward.

This was a long time ago when Hofstra was a backwater college, mostly a commuter school, but a place full of people hungry for knowledge. Professors hungry to teach. Students hungry to learn. All of them hungry to prove themselves. And me . . . getting a do-over.

I hadn't had girls in my classes for ages. All of a sudden, girls, women, were everywhere—raising their hands, expressing ideas, walking circles around me; smarter, tougher, better than me. And disabled people everywhere! Hofstra was the first college to go handicap-accessible everywhere, long before America was doing anything.

All of a sudden, I'm in the library, in the cafeteria, in the lab with the most severely disabled people. I mean, this was a time when disabled people were mostly still hidden away. All of a sudden they are my classmates, raising their hands, expressing ideas, walking circles around me, smarter, tougher, better than me.

And there were soldiers everywhere. Hofstra had mandatory ROTC, *mandatory!* That means yes, me, your long-haired no-good-nik hippie! I had uniform and a gun and marching drills every Friday afternoon. Can you picture it?

The whole Hofstra experience was God at the top of Jacob's ladder, looking down at me, and God's saying, "Boy, you are a waste of human flesh. Get over yourself. Wake up. Those soldiers over there, they're more dedicated than you are. Those disabled people over there, they're stronger than you are. Those women over there, they're better than your prideful jock self will ever be. You awake, yet, boy?"

Maybe I've preached my way into a sermon, after all. I've told you a smidgen of my path to ordination. I've announced an upcoming inconsequential birthday, I've taken an Old Testament classic story and song and updated them for us.

And, I told you Lent starts in 10 days, Ash Wednesday. Let's face it, Lent is about life and death, the brutal truth that death comes to all of us, sooner or later. Jesus's Good Friday crucifixion is living proof that nobody escapes its reaches. Ash Wednesday's ashes are a visible, touchable reminder that we all return to dust and ash.

None of that is meant to be discombobulating. It's meant to be combobulating, encouraging, to get us to put our life together in such a way that we are ready, fulfilled, proud, confident, grateful for the life we live *and* the life that awaits us.

Easter, and the angels walking up and down on Jacob's ladder, both are good news—that the next life is only a ladder's length away, *this* close!

A big part of Lent in our Church is our daily Lenten Devotional, 50 days of great writing by our own people. The theme this year is the Old Testament, which I introduce with a little humor: that the Old Testament is the only Bible Jesus had—and he turned out O.K. So we shouldn't ignore it, sideline it, or minimize it.

Jacob was told straight out by God, "You and your people will bless the whole world." And one of those people is Jesus, who takes us deeper into life *and* beyond death.

There's that ladder again, bridging life as it is, and life as it will be.

I've always loved the Old Testament. Once God shook me up and Hofstra shaped me up, by the time I got to seminary, wonder of wonders, I was a good student. I went to class. I read the books. I studied hard. And more than anything, I majored in the Old Testament, taking every course I could and getting grades like the one at the beginning of the alphabet.

I was so deep into the Old Testament that on graduation day, as they announced the winner of the Best Old Testament Student prize, I stood up to receive the honor—but it wasn't for me!

I was not embarrassed. I was furious. I got robbed! But I'll tell you this. I've read this year's Lenten Old Testament-based devotions. They're better than what I wrote back then: more thoughtful, more relevant, more personal.

To put it in literary terms, in seminary, I got the nouns right—names and places. But our devotion writers, they got the verbs and adjectives right—the feel, the spirit.

So I'm going to read one of those Lenten Devotions right now, before Lent even begins. It's by Mary Jacobson, and the assignment I gave her was a tough one, from the Ten Commandments, *Exodus 20:8*, "*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.*"

Mary imagines the ideal Sunday, up against what Sunday is really like in suburban America. Before landing on the truth we all need to hear. She writes:

Close your eyes and imagine your perfect day for a moment . . .

THE DREAM: You wake up to the gorgeous sunrise and the birds singing at your window . . . Your husband waltzes in with warm coffee and homemade French toast. After reading The New York Times in bed, you dedicate a full hour to yoga and meditation. During this quiet time, you connect with God and pray. You fill your soul with thanks and inspiration and head outside for a leisurely family walk to church. Your children skip ahead. Afterwards, you all return to a Covid-free house, a stocked fridge, and fresh laundry! The entire family cooks a meal together . . . made from the freshest ingredients bought at your local farmer's market. You end your evening feeling rested, happy, and full! Off to a full 9 hours of sleep you go.

THE REALITY: You bolt out of bed after snoozing through an abrupt and annoying alarm clock. You're already late . . . FOR EVERYTHING! You gather yourself after you allot a few peaceful moments to God thanking him for your family, health, and joy. For your church and community. For this day! Then you RUN to make swim team lunches and carpool snacks, but NOTHING is in the fridge but cheese . . . No time to work out, or shower, it's go time. The husband is traveling for work so it's just you . . . ! You get everyone in the car and buckled when your youngest cries out that she's supposed to wear pink to the birthday party you're now late for. "It's a pink party!" she cries with heavy tears. You take a breath . . . Then, aha! You find a red scarf under the passenger seat! Close enough to pink against her white sweater! Off you go.

Just 12 more hours like this till bedtime.

The Truth: God is with us always. Sometimes our Sundays are packed with 6 am swim meets and basketball games and theater practice and script deadlines. And endless birthday parties. So much pizza. OK. That's fine. But we try to set aside quiet time for God as a family. We try to honor him at our meals, on our walks, in our quiet pockets during the day as we thank him. For he is the one that carries us in life's most challenging moments. So regardless of what the day brings, be it snow, Covid, traffic, or sibling rivalry, God is there with us. From morning to night and through our dreams.

You see what Mary did? She took a 3,500-year-old Old Testament Bible verse, she brought it right into our 2022 daily life, still teaching us the fundamental truth about God. I like that. Thanks to Jacob's ladder, Mary's Sabbath, and Hofstra University, we got a sermon.