

10 November 2010
Pentecost 24 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“Jacob’s Ladder is Jesus”

Text: Genesis 28:10-17; Ephesians 4:22-28; Matthew 9:1-8

We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder is the name of an old negro spiritual, still sung today in many Sunday Schools and around many campfires. It may be a good song, *but it is bad theology*. For it is not we who climb Jacob’s ladder. It is not we who ascend to heaven, rung by rung, step by step. The story of Jacob’s ladder we heard tonight teaches us that the expanse between heaven and earth is bridged not by our efforts to reach God, but by God coming down to us. And specifically, God coming down to us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ. Down to all of us hard-headed and hard-hearted Jacobs with His promise and blessing. That we may know that He is not only *the* Lord, by *my* Lord.

You see, Jacob had reason to doubt that. His name meant *heel*, and he certainly lived up to his name. Taking advantage of his brother Esau and stealing his birthright by tricking his father Isaac. Now Jacob was alone, a fugitive from his brother’s wrath. By his life and actions, he was most assuredly *not* climbing to God, but digging his own grave.

But the one who comes to Jacob that night (we learn a bit later) *specializes in raising the dead*. And that is what He has come to do for Jacob. He tells Jacob: I am not only the God of your grandfather Abraham and your father Isaac, I am *your* God. And the promises I spoke to them, I now speak to you. And so God has not rejected Jacob, but has, in fact, chosen him. Not because Jacob deserved it, for he surely didn’t. But because God is gracious and merciful. Because God’s forgiveness and life is even for hard-headed and hard-hearted heels. And so when Jacob wakes up, he is a new man. He rises from his sleep, yes; but even more, he has been raised from the death of his sins. Before, blinded by sin, he did not know and could not see that the Lord was with him. But now he knows. God has descended and *condescended* to him. And so, he says, ***How awesome is this place!*** Where a holy God comes to sinful men to make them holy.

This is what we see also with the paralyzed man brought to Jesus. God has come down from heaven; the expanse between heaven and earth has been bridged in the person of the God-man, Jesus; God is with His people to save them and raise them from the death of sin. And so when this man is brought to Him, Jesus does just that, saying, ***“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”*** And ***how awesome is this place*** where God comes to man with life and forgiveness. . . . And yet some, in

response to this, think: ***This man is blaspheming.*** They weren't bold enough to actually speak it; they said it only to themselves, in their hearts. Their hearts which were trying to climb Jacob's ladder; trying by their own efforts to climb their way to God. And so they were blind to the fact that God had come down to them.

But that they may know - just as He did with Jacob - Jesus lets them see. He says to the paralytic: ***"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."*** And he does. For he has been raised and made new.

And so it is for you and me. Perhaps you, like Jacob, have been a heel and done things you're not proud of. Perhaps because of them, you find yourself estranged from others. Like the paralyzed man, you have sins that need forgiveness, and like the scribes, you've grumbled against God. And perhaps you've been trying to climb Jacob's ladder - trying to get to God by being better, by trying harder, thinking that you need to be a certain way to please God and have Him be your God.

But it is not so! For to you, too, God has come. For you, it wasn't in a dream (like Jacob), and it wasn't lying on a bed (like the paralyzed man) - for you it was in the water of Holy Baptism. But it was the same Jesus coming to you and raising you from the death of sin to live a new life. For there, with the power of His Word and Spirit, He said to you: *I am your God, and He is.* And He says, ***Take heart, your sins are forgiven,*** and they are. And one day He will say to you, ***Rise, and come home,*** and you will. For you are baptized into the one who atoned for your sins by His death on the cross, broke the power of the grave in His resurrection, and then ascended from earth to heaven. And all of that He did for you, to take you to be with Him. For you see, **Jesus is the ladder to heaven, to bring to you and give to you the life you could never achieve.**

For now, there is life in this world to live - life as a risen child of God. To live no longer as the old hard-headed, hard-hearted heel, but, as St. Paul said, to ***put off your old self*** and ***put on the new self.*** That's baptismal language. To remember that God has made you His child and rescued you from ungodliness. That you be not your same old self, but ***be renewed in the spirit of your minds*** - made new in Christ. Inside and out. To live in righteousness and holiness.

It's not easy to do that, but remember that you are not alone. Jacob did not realize that the Lord had been with Him all along, but He was. And He is with you. To be your strength when weak, to give you faith in doubt, and to forgive you when you fall. For where the Word of God is, there is Jesus for you, working in you all these things by His Spirit. And ***how awesome is that place*** where Christ descends. And like with Jacob, ***He will not leave you until He has done what He has promised you.*** And what has He promised you? Eternal life in the Promised Land of Heaven!

Until then, don't worry about climbing Jacob's ladder - your Jesus has come down to you. Live your life here with Him, where He has put you, with the people He has placed around you. Living no longer as a heel, but as the holy one you are.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.