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Sermon

July 18th, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 1:5-6 NKJ)

Our sermon text for this Sunday is taken from the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, starting at verse 10:

**Jacob set out from Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and decided to spend the night there, because the sun had set. He took one of the stones from that place, put it under his head, and lay down to sleep in that place. 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. There were angels of God ascending and descending on it. 13 There at the top stood the LORD, who said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The land on which you are lying, I give to you and to your descendants. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. In you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed. 15 Now, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back again into this land. Indeed, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you." 16 Jacob woke up from his sleep, and he said, "Certainly the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 He was afraid and he said, "How awe-inspiring is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this is the gate to heaven." 18 Jacob got up early in the morning. He took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a sacred memorial stone and poured oil on top of it. 19 He named that place Bethel. (Before this, the name of the city had been Luz.) 20 Jacob took a vow, "If God will be with me to keep me safe on this journey I am making, and if he gives me food to eat and clothing to put on, 21 and I come back to my father's house in safety, the LORD will be my God, 22 and this stone that I have set up as a memorial stone will be God's house, and I will certainly give you a tenth of everything that you give me."**

This is the Word of the LORD!!!

Mercy, Grace, and peace are yours through your God and Father, and through His Son, Jesus Christ, true God and Man, dear fellow Sons and Daughters of the King...

Ralph Waldo Emerson is often credited with the phrase, "Life is a journey, not a destination." What does that phrase mean? Is it true?

Have you ever had a memorable journey? Summer is often the season of road trips. We go places in the summer. We go on vacations, summer camps, or to family reunions. We often have time off in our schedules and people decide to make the most of it. Have you ever had a memorable road trip?

I have. It's the summer of 2008, and after a tumultuous first year after graduating from high school, I decided to hit the road. I quit my job, pilled all of my belongs in my little Saturn, and drove from Wisconsin to Washington. It was an interesting and

long trip, one I made without cruise control. I had a difficult time in Billings Montana trying to buy a hotel room when I was only 19. From there I went to Spokane to visit a girl who turned out to be my future wife. I lost my wallet there, which was devastating at the time, but I eventually found. I then traveled here, to Tacoma. Somewhere around highway 18, my car started to seize because I had basically no oil in it. Finally, I made it to my mother's house and got an oil change. Eventually I made the return trip to Wisconsin and would move to Madison to start college for the second time.

That trip was memorable to me. It was good, but some challenging things happened to me. Eventually

it all worked out, but not the way that I had originally planned.

That's how life works, isn't it? We plan certain things, and then other things happen. As the song says, "Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans." The fact of the matter is that God has a plan for each of us. All we do is try to figure out what that is. Today, we see a particularly interesting trip by Jacob. It's memorable because of what happens to him. It's also memorable because of what got him there and what would happen to him after that. Life is all about the journey, but the life of faith is very much about both journey and destination. The outcome is uncertain, but the LORD's guidance never is. He leads us in the house of God, and He leads us to the His House as well! We pray: LORD, SANCTIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!

#### **Jacob set out from Beersheba and traveled toward Haran.**

A trip from Beersheba to Haran is not a small jaunt. The number may differ, but it's in the ballpark of about 500 miles! Why was he going on such a long journey?

When I made that trip that I previously described, it was for several reasons. I went to visit family. I went to go see about a girl. But I also went to clear my mind. There's nothing like a several days road trip alone with your thoughts to do some serious reflecting.

This trip Jacob took was also made for several reasons. Most of it had to do with his brother Esau. Esau had despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. But Jacob also deceitfully stole his father's blessing, one that Esau thought was meant for him. Esau was so mad that he determined once his father had died, so also would Jacob.

Jacob was running away from the wrath of his brother. But he was also going to visit family. Esau had already married a couple of Hittite women, and the Bible comments that **they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. (Gen 26:35 ESV)** So, both of his

parents implored him to go to Haran, where his uncle Laban lived. They wanted him to get a wife there. If he had just married another Canaanite woman like his brother did, it would have been more of the same. They wanted a godly woman for this son, the one to whom "all the nations of the earth would be blessed."

So, he went. He didn't have much with him, as we see here, he used a rock for a pillow. He didn't know what was going to happen to him or how this was all going to shake out. Perhaps his brother would catch up to him, or something even worse would happen to him on this journey. He was facing quite the uncertain future.

What is more frightening than an uncertain future? When tomorrow is unknown, we tend to panic. But isn't evert tomorrow uncertain? We like to think that we have some amount of control. We don't. But we don't have to live life at the edge of our seats. Jesus said: **"Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Mat 6:26 NKJ)** We don't live life by chance or happenstance. We live by faith. We have confidence that the LORD is with us, come what may!

We are not told what Jacob's anxiety level was at this point and time. I know that I would be uneasy if I was in his shoes. But he would soon be comforted by an uncomfortable dream: **12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. There were angels of God ascending and descending on it. 13 There at the top stood the LORD, who said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The land on which you are lying, I give to you and to your descendants. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. In you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.**

This event is known forever as “Jacob’s Ladder”. Many different artists have tried to depict this scene. It’s an image that has been referenced throughout the ages. From the famous negro spiritual, all the way to the Led Zeppelin song, “Stairway to Heaven”. But what did this actually look like?

Well, besides what the Bible says here, I can’t really say. The word that is translated “stairway” here, (“ladder” in other translations) is an interesting one. It’s not used anywhere else in the Bible. I think the way my brain interrupts it is like an escalator. You have angels both going up and down from heaven. Then you have the LORD at the top who calls down to the dreamer. The words He pronounces a blessing much like He did Abraham and Isaac. He announces who He is. Then He promises the land as a future home. Next, He promises that his descendants would indeed be great. He promises that He would be with him and continue to bless him wherever he would go. And the the Messiah is also promised, as it was to his father and his father before him: **In you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.**

This was an uncomfortable scene, this heavenly staircase. But the Word spoken on it is extremely comforting. What was Jacob’s reaction when he awoke? **“Certainly the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”**

Jacob’s faith level is not really evident up to this point. But within this heavenly vision he sees clearly what is going on. He knew that he was not alone on this journey. The LORD was with him and would continue to be.

Think how encouraging these words must have been to Jacob. He’s on this uncertain journey, running away from his brother, hopefully he’ll find his distant family, but there are months away. But now, everything is ok. He knows that God is with Him, and will continue to be with Him, and one day will bring him back to this very place.

But these promises are not Jacob’s alone. Are they not also yours? We have not dreamed of a heavenly staircase, but we have seen it here today in

the Word. We have been led by faith to understand who this LORD is and have a relationship with Him. We are not promised any acreage, but we know that He is with us wherever we go. We are not guaranteed earthly descendants, but we will have a multitude of spiritual ones, brothers and sisters in Christ. In Jacob, all the families of the earth have been blessed! Jesus Christ, his descendant, was born and blessed all of us with His life and death. The Lord Jesus said, **“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Mat 28:20 NKJ)**

He is with us and will continue to be. How have you gotten here today? Was it not the LORD being with you and guiding you? I look back at myself on that trip, a stupid and naïve 19-year-old. Life did not turn out like I had planned. It turned out far better than I ever could’ve dreamed. The LORD was with me, blessed me with an education and occupation, blessed me with a wife and family, and has brought me safely here to this day. If you look back on the events of your life, surely you too can see God’s hand guiding you. Why should we be worried about an “uncertain future”? Will not the LORD of heaven and earth continue to be with us? What have we to fear then?

God had led Jacob to that point in his life, and he would continue to do so throughout his earthly pilgrimage. Jacob could see what we also can see. A future, one that is built on faith in the LORD: **17 He was afraid and he said, “How awe-inspiring is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this is the gate to heaven.”** Jacob then gets up, takes that stone which he had been sleeping on, and sets it up as a memorial stone, and renames the place Bethel, which is a Hebrew word which means “house of God”.

Then, he makes a promise to the LORD: **20 Jacob took a vow, “If God will be with me to keep me safe on this journey I am making, and if he gives me food to eat and clothing to put on, 21 and I come back to my father’s house in safety, the**

**LORD will be my God, 22 and this stone that I have set up as a memorial stone will be God's house, and I will certainly give you a tenth of everything that you give me."**

To us, this vow may seem problematic. We kind of see this as a weak promise. "If the LORD does X, and then does Y, and then also does Z, then He will be my God." But you can also translate this another way. Not so much as a quid pro quo, but more of an admittance. Instead of translating it as "If", you could also translate it "Seeing that" or "since".

It's not up to us to determine Jacob's faith. He was certainly a sinner like us, and He makes some painful sinful decisions in his life, as do both you and me. If this is a weak promise, then he's doing something that we do all the time! But I think you can see this vow in a better way. I don't believe he's saying that if God does this whole laundry list of things, only then will he worship Him. I think he is saying "Since God is with me, has kept me safe, has given food and clothing, when I come back here (as He just promised that I would), then I will make this a house of God."

And that's exactly what happens. He goes to Laban, works for him for 20 years, gets as a wife his daughter (daughters, but that's another story), becomes wealthy both in family and property, and returns to this very same place, this Bethel. **"Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone." 6 So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. 7 And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother. (Gen 35:3, 6-7 NKJ)**

He renamed the place he previous renamed Bethel. Now he calls it "El Bethel", that is, "God's House of God".

God leads us to His house as well. That is why we are here today, in this very house of God. When we are here, we are led by His Word just like Jacob was.

It might not tell us where to live, but it most certainly tells us where to go. How to go. Where to go to where we don't know what to do next. That's why church is so important. Yes, certainly God is everywhere, as Jacob saw firsthand. Some people think that it's better to spend Sunday morning in a tree stand or boat then it is to spend it in a church pew. But God's Word isn't in the trees or lake. It made them, but His Word is proclaimed in church. Here we have the opportunity to worship Him and to do so together. What a blessing it is to have a house dedicated to our God and to come together and worship Him!

Yes, God leads us through the Word, in our lives and in church. But that leading also leads us to a final destination. As Jacob said, **"How awe-inspiring is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this is the gate to heaven."**

We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are all on a journey. Every day that we live is one day closer to being with the LORD. One day, He will graciously bring us to our heavenly home. For the Christian, life is not just about the journey. Certainly, the journey is something to be mindful of. But the destination is as equally important.

When we look back at our journeys, we see how gracious God has been. But we also see all the times we have been weak, doubted, and straight up disobeyed. We do not deserve to be brought to the gate of heaven, rather our sins drag us the gates of hell! But we have the ladder, the stairway, JESUS CHRIST THE RIGHTEOUS!!! **For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself a ransom for all (1Ti 2:3-6 NKJ)**

Jesus is what connects us to God. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Door. He is the only ladder which gets men to heaven. He is the reason we can approach the LORD. He is our go-between. We

cannot climb that ladder ourselves. That's why I picture it more as an escalator, I think. Climbing a ladder takes effort, so does walking up a staircase. But the escalator not only is a way to ascend, but it's also the means by which you ascend. And that, dear friends in Christ, is exactly what Jesus is! He is way to heaven, and He is the means by which we are on that way. Through Jacob, all the families of the earth would be blessed. That is the case because through Jacob would come Jesus!

"Life is a journey, not a destination." Do you think that is true? Perhaps. But if you look at it in the light of faith, life is both a journey and a destination. As we live our lives on this earth, we journey and sojourn. Good things happen, and so do bad things. God gives us blessings and we sin. That's life for you. But eternal life is absolutely a destination, one we have already been given by faith, and one that we strive to keep moving onto. We do so by coming to Bethel, the house of God. One day, we will reach the ultimate House of God, our heavenly home. We keep making that trip, climbing the ladder of Jesus. The journey is memorable and challenging. The destination is heavenly rest and eternal glory. He Himself will bring you there. We will continue to praise Him in His house here, and one day will praise Him forever in the heavenly home He has given us! AMEN!!!