

“More than a Dream”

Introduction: Last week we noticed how Jesus, after emerging from his time of testing in the wilderness, began to gather folks who were interested in following him. To that end, we saw that he issued two invitations. In one, through his question, “What do you want?” Jesus sought to begin a conversation around desire, around identifying the loves and the longings that direct our actions. A second invitation was heard in the offer, “Come and see.” This was an invitation to come and check Jesus out, to come and see what he is all about.

As we pick up the action, we’ll hear both Philip and Jesus issue this offer to a man named Nathanael. As he and Jesus begin to interact around the topic of seeing, Jesus takes Nathanael to back to an episode in the life of a man named Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. God, we will see, meets Jacob in a very hard place in his life. Jesus wants us to know that no matter how we, like Jacob, might be struggling with our past, or uncertain about our future, or overwhelmed by our present, that Jesus is with us and has some wonderful things for us to see.

I. Broken Places

A. When we meet Jacob on his journey to Haran we find a broken man who has just laid his head on a stone for a pillow, and who really is between a rock and a hard place! Jacob, which means “he deceives,” had managed to trick his older brother Esau out of both his inheritance rights as the firstborn son, as well as his father’s blessing. Among other things, when Esau finally realized what Jacob had done to him, it resulted in Esau’s desire to find his brother and to kill him. So, Jacob is running for his life. Probably, he is not only running from his brother but from himself and the checkered past he had lived. The deceit which had marked his life had likely begun to sink into his soul. Behind him lay a broken past.

B. Jacob also had before him an uncertain future. He had never been to Haran, the home of his uncle, his mother Rebecca’s brother. How would he be received? How long would he have to stay? Would he be able to find a wife there, as his father had instructed him to do? So many unanswered questions. And then, in the midst of his broken past and uncertain future, Jacob was experiencing a very uncomfortable present. He was about 50 miles into a 500-mile journey. While travelers in the ancient near east were often taken in for the night by nearby townsfolk, it was not to be so with Jacob. Either there were no lodgings nearby or no one was feeling very hospitable. Moreover, it was his brother, Esau, who was the outdoorsman. Jacob didn’t like this camping out stuff very much. He preferred to be at home cooking in his kitchen. But here he was, having to sleep outside, all alone, without a single servant, and only a stone for a pillow.

C. Jacob, by any measure, was in a broken, desperate place, truly between a rock and a hard place. Maybe you know someone in that place. Or maybe you have been there, or are there, weighed down by bad choices, or at the wrong end of a restructuring at work, or having just received difficult medical news, or struggling with a difficult spouse or child, or having had your life so upended by the pandemic that you see no way out. Our past seems distant, our future cloudy, and our present grim. Such desperation can lead us to believe that God is far, far away.

Illustration: You might recall, back in 1997, a cult that took the name “Heaven’s Gate.” Their headquarters was located just outside San Diego, and during holy week of that year, 39 of their members committed suicide. They believed that they could escape this world and somehow jump on a comet that would be able to ride to immortality. One member of the cult made a video before she took her life. She said to those who would find it and watch it: “Maybe they are crazy for all I know. But I don’t have any choice but to go for it. I’ve been on this planet for thirty-one years and there is nothing here for me.” The news coverage of this event was so intense that the coverage itself became a story. It was suggested that maybe we had become so fascinated by these deaths because underneath it all, we had come to recognize a similar form of desperation within ourselves.

II. God’s Amazing Grace

A. But the good news is that there’s amazing grace. The good news, as Jacob discovered, is that desperation does not have the last word and that we don’t have to take desperate measures to get to heaven’s gate. Instead, heaven’s gate has come to us. In fact, it is often at those times when we find ourselves not knowing where to turn or where to go, at precisely those times when we are overwhelmed by our past, future, and present that God meets us, and we learn that in fact, God has been there all along. “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it,” Jacob confesses. Much of our growing awareness has to do, I think, with the fact that we are finally in a place where we can be receptive to what God has for us. This was certainly the case with Jacob. For years he had struggled mightily, even deceitfully, to get God’s blessing. Only when he could struggle no more, only when he had come to an end of himself could he discover that God was right there with him.

B. This good news for Jacob was revealed to him in a dream. It certainly wasn’t an aluminum ladder that was pictured for him, nor just a simple stairway. More likely was a structure in the Ancient Near East known as a *ziggurat*. This was a stone or brick structure, square at the base, with stepped sides rising up to a point in pyramid-like fashion. Whatever it was, the important feature was that heaven and earth had been connected. Further, angels, who patrolled the earth protecting God’s people, were there, going up and down, protecting Jacob. And above all, God was present, and provided just what Jacob needed. God redeemed Jacob’s past, declaring that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. God’s promise to Abraham, and then to Isaac, that their offspring would bring blessing to the world, God extended through Jacob. God assured Jacob of his future, promising to bring Jacob back to this land, that he would not be on the run, or away from home, forever. And God assured Jacob of his presence in the present, promising to be with Jacob wherever he went, not leaving him until all had been accomplished.

God healed Jacob’s past, gave him hope for his future, and promised to be his companion in the present. But was this just a dream? Is it true? Can God really work this way, with our broken past, our uncertain future, and our discomfort in the present?

III. Seeing Greater Things

A. Well, consider a man named Nathanael. Nathanael, as we heard, had been invited by a friend named Philip to come and see this fellow Jesus, who Philip and a few others were starting to believe was the one anticipated by Moses and the prophets who would renew and restore all that had gone wrong with God’s good creation. But Nathanael couldn’t figure how someone this amazing could possibly have come from the backwater Galilean town of Nazareth. However, when he went to check this Jesus out,

he discovered that Jesus has already been checking him out and in fact knew quite a bit about him. It's often the case that when we go looking for Jesus, we discover that he has seen us first! In any event, Nathanael was impressed by how deeply Jesus knew him and confessed Jesus as the Son of God and king of Israel. As great as this insight was, Jesus responded by declaring that if he stuck around, he would see even greater things than these.

B. To anticipate these greater things, Jesus takes Nathanael, and any who were listening, back to Jacob's dream. Jesus then declares that he has come to fulfill the reality of that dream. He actually is the stairway that has come from heaven and connects God to earth. He is the one through whom God reaches out and brings blessing to mankind. As he does so, he meets us in the hard places of our past, future, and present. Through his crucifixion, he assures us of God's pardon. We don't have to run anymore. Through his resurrection, he assures us of our future. We have a home to which we are going. Through his ascension, he assures us that by the gift of the Spirit, he will be with us always. We will never be truly alone.

C. Jesus brings the gate of heaven to earth. It means that you and I, as well as Jacob, Nathanael and all who were beginning to see Jesus, are wonderfully seen by God. We might think we are washed up, but in point of fact only need to be washed off. We might think we are about to be tossed out, but discover that we are actually treasured. We might think we're going to get left by the side of the road, but find out that this God, through the good shepherd that is his Son, stoops down and lifts us up.

If you are running from something in your past, if you are uncertain about what the future holds, if you are feeling overwhelmed by your present circumstances, spend some time with Jacob. Let him bring you to the ladder, and the love, that we find available to us in Jesus.