

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

¹⁶ *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."*
¹⁷ *He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."* (Genesis 28:10-17)

This is the House of God!

Do you ever wonder why we spend so much money on church buildings? This building cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Don't you think that putting up a pole barn would've been cheaper than this building with its dramatic front and windows and its artistic ceiling structure? But we make churches as beautiful as we can. Why do we do that? This is God's house. When we come here, don't we want to feel like we've left the humdrum behind? Don't we want to feel like coming into the presence of God means stepping out of the difficulties and the hurts and the challenges of life in this sinful world? Of course, it isn't the beauty and the expense that make this God's house. The story before us this morning drives that point home. No work of art, no beautiful architecture, no organ or pews or altar make this the house of God. That's caused by something greater than what we build: God is present here among us. **This is the house of God!**

I.

This account we're studying this morning is one of two parallel incidents in the life of Jacob. Twice, he found himself in the presence of God, once as he left the Promised Land and once again when he returned. When he came home, Jacob wrestled with God physically. But on this night, Jacob met God in a dream. Jacob was the son and principle heir of a very rich man, Isaac. But he had to make a hasty exit from his father's house. So instead of traveling in a caravan, riding a horse and accompanied by servants and supplies, Jacob was alone and on foot with only a staff in his hand. Why? Because he had stolen his father's blessing from his twin brother, Esau. After years of rivalry and favoritism from their parents, Esau had come to hate his brother. He was planning to kill him. Jacob fled to escape. His parents covered the whole thing with a fig leaf of respectability by telling him to go back to his mother's family to look for a wife. But the hurried and humble exit shows what the driving force really was.

As this pampered son of a rich man lay down by the road, exhausted and alone, with only a rock for his pillow, he had to be very concerned about his future. Would he ever come home again? Would he ever receive his inheritance? Would he ever see his parents again? With all those thoughts whirling in his head, Jacob went to sleep. What happens to you when you go to bed with worries and cares on your mind? If you're tired enough, you'll sleep. But your mind will probably replay those cares and concerns over and over again in your dreams. Jacob had a dream. But this dream was much more than the standard replaying of our daily cares. This dream was a message from God.

In his dream, Jacob saw a stairway between heaven and earth. At the top of the stairway stood God. Between God and this earth, angels were going up and down on the stairway. What did this dream mean? The key element is the stairway. It connected heaven and earth. It connected God to us who live here below. It provided a way for the angels of God to come down here to do his work and then report back to him.

When Jacob woke up, he said, **"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."** The dream revealed that Jacob was in God's presence. He said, **"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."** Without any walls or art or even a floor, Jacob was in the house of God because he was in the place where God revealed his presence to him. What does it mean that God

is with us? Sometimes it means that God is watching over us and protecting us. Sometimes, it speaks of our relationship to him in worship – when two or three come together in his name, Jesus is with us. Sometimes, it means that his body and blood are with us in the Lord’s Supper.

Sometimes it means something even greater. It means that God has come down to this earth and taken on human flesh. Centuries later, Isaiah said that Jesus’ name would be Immanuel which means God with us. God isn’t just with us emotionally. God became one of us. He joined our human race and lived our lives. That’s what this dream is really about. When Jesus called the disciple Nathaniel he said, **“I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”** Whether or not Jacob comprehended it, this is what Jesus says this dream really means. God has become man to bridge the gap that divides us from him and to provide a way for God’s angels to serve us, God’s children.

Why did we need Jesus to do that? For the very same reasons that we like our churches to transport us from our ordinary lives to the house of God. Pain and loss and sorrow are a very real part of our lives. It’s been all over the news this week. GM might go bankrupt. Who knows how many jobs will be lost in this area if they do. Michigan already has the worst unemployment of any state in the union. In spite of spending billions of dollars shoring up banks, their stock continues to drop. Consumer confidence is lower than it’s been in decades. That’s just the economic news. We haven’t talked about the people we’re going to pray for this morning – people who are sick or in prison. We haven’t talked about your latest trip to the doctor or the stress in your marriage or the worries you have for your children. Life here hurts. God’s solution was to send Jesus down here to conquer the hurts and sorrows of our lives by conquering their cause: our sin.

Our sin divides us from the perfect lives God intended us to have. It does more than that. Our sin divides us from God himself. Every sinner is born on the wrong side of the line. We’re born as God’s enemies. We can never cross over to his side on our own. The truth is no sinner wants to. Even for us who have been brought over to God’s side, we still struggle with the sin inside us. Every sin we enjoy – every time we take a perverse pleasure in putting someone else in their place, every time we listen to our own sinful hearts or the voices of our friends or our society or the media instead of listening to God – we’re racing for that line, trying to get back onto the other side.

We needed Jesus to cross the line and bring us back. To do that, Jesus had to leave heaven. He had to enter the womb of the Virgin Mary and take on a real human nature. He had to be born and live like we live. He had to endure hardship and pain and loss. At the same time, he had to be the perfect child of God that we can never be. Then he had to die. He had to load up all the sin that we’re guilty of and take it to the cross. There, he had to suffer everything that our sin does to us, including our horrible separation from God. On that cross, he said, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** He suffered all the hurts of this life and all the pain of the hell that comes after. He endured everything sin does to us.

He died and then he rose. When he rose he lifted us from this life to God. Jesus is the stairway that connects heaven and earth. In his body, God is with us. God is one of us. Because we’re reconnected to God, all our sin is erased forever. And the angels of God serve us. They’re kind of like that Verizon Wireless commercial about the crowd of people who follow your cell phone everywhere. The angels go back and forth in a continuous stream that runs right through the body and blood of Christ. All that was there in Jacob’s dream. Seeing Christ there made that empty place the house of God. Seeing Christ here makes this building more than a gathering place or a lecture hall. **This is the house of God because this is where we see Jesus.**

II.

Of course, there was more to the dream than just what Jacob saw. God spoke to him. He told Jacob that he was the God of his father, Isaac and of his grandfather, Abraham. Ever since he was a little boy, Jacob had heard the story of how God had called his grandfather to leave his home and travel to a country he’d never seen before. He’d heard about Abraham’s 25 year wait for Isaac to be born. He’d heard of Abraham offering Isaac as a sacrifice. That father Isaac had raised him and his brother to worship the God who had spoken to him, too. All through the narrative ran the promises God had made. The same God was now talking to Jacob.

And he had the same plan for Jacob that he had for his fathers. He offered the same promises. Promises to make his descendants into a great people. Promises to possess the land of Canaan. But above all, God repeated this key promise: **“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.”** That promise goes far beyond the physical land and the people that came from Jacob. God was going to give a gift to all peoples on earth through Jacob and his offspring. What was that gift? Jesus!

My friends, we're not physical Jews. We're not descendants of Jacob. When these things happened, our ancestors were living thousands of miles away worshipping who knows what idols. For generations, from father to son and mother to daughter, that idol worship continued. It went on and on until God finally interrupted it with the gospel. Maybe in your family tree, that happened centuries ago. Maybe it happened with you or with your parents. Maybe it happened more than once in your family tree as faith lived in one generation and died in the next, and then God rekindled it. But God has blessed us all through Jacob and his seed. Jesus came from his line. He was born for us. He lived and he died and he rose to pay for our sin and guilt.

Now, the blessing of Christ is carried to every nation under heaven. Jacob could never have imagined airplanes carrying missionaries throughout the world or short wave radio broadcasts into China and North Korea and Iran. He couldn't have imagined websites and TV shows and armies of Christians going door to door or mailing invitations or simply sitting down with people from work and talking about their Savior. To Jacob, the faith was limited to his family and their servants and their relatives in his mother's family. But God always had a greater plan.

To make that plan work, God promised to be with Jacob and to watch over him and to bring him back to that very spot so he could worship the Lord. God kept that promise. It took twenty years for Jacob to return. Yet, God took a man who had to leave all his worldly wealth behind and brought him home again rich in every measure. He had wealth again. He had a large family. He had a brother who put his hatred aside and welcomed him. And even his elderly parents lived to see him return. But none of that was the greatest blessing. For twenty years, God trained Jacob in the faith. Through adversity and triumph, through difficulty and joy, when he sinned and when he repented, God taught him to trust in the Lord for this life and for the life to come.

God has been training us in the faith from the moment that he taught us to trust in our Savior. Sunday after Sunday, we leave behind the difficulties and the trials of this life and we hear about Jesus and all that he did for us. Then we bring all those difficulties to God and he promises us relief. He promises us eternal life where we'll be free from all that sin has done to us. He promises that even in this life, he will be with us in joy and in sorrow, in good times and in bad. He promises to train us and to draw us closer to him and to use his word and his sacraments to strengthen our faith every single day. All that happens here. Hopefully, we take that word with us and we use it in our homes and in our lives. But my friends, **this is the house of God because this is where we hear his promises.**

This beautiful building is the house of God. But it isn't the beauty that makes this the house of God. I've preached the gospel in many more humble places – in an upper room above a butcher shop in Bogota, in tiny house churches with no ventilation or decoration in Cuba, in the living room of an apartment in New York City. But every place on earth where God caused someone to preach the gospel, that was the house of God. This is the house of God because here we see Jesus. In this place, we hear God's promises. And we find joy and strength and renewal for our faith until we stand in God's real house in heaven. Amen.