

Trinity 9 (2020)

“In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning,” so observed novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Well, it was ‘a real dark night of the soul’ for Jacob in today’s Old Testament lesson. Not only was he away from his family, he was in some sense away from God, or so it seemed.

I wonder if you’ve been there? Something knocks you off your feet. It might have been a medical diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a divorce, a physical separation from family and friends.

Whatever it was, it was as if the bottom had dropped out. You felt all alone. Yes, even God seemed far away.

If you have been there, you know how Jacob felt that night as he laid his head on the only pillow available, a stone.

Let’s backtrack a minute. Who was Jacob?

Those of you who have been attending our services regularly over the past nine weeks will know that we have been on a journey . . . a journey through Genesis.

In Genesis 1 we saw God creating the world good.

But in Genesis 3 we saw a roadblock come down in front of God’s good creation project.

The tempter tells Eve, “You can be as God,” and she takes the bait.

As a result, the first couple is forced to flee the garden, paradise lost. Fellowship between God and man is broken. Earth and heaven are split apart. Yet, God is not finished.

As we continued to move through Genesis, we found God setting in motion a plan whereby creation, including His human creatures, might be put right and earth and heaven put back together.

This plan, began with the call of Abraham.

It would be through Abraham and his offspring that this reuniting would come about.

Today this story moves forward to Abraham's grandson Jacob. He is the third of the patriarchs. In order they are: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Of the three we may well draw our greatest encouragement from Jacob. How so?

Precisely because he is so flawed, or at least that is how he starts off life. The encouragement comes from the knowledge that God can and does use flawed people, people not unlike ourselves.

If you think you don't measure up to the stature of a saint, don't despair. Look at Jacob who began life as a trickster.

Indeed, that is why he is on the run. His brother Esau is seeking to kill him for taking first his birthright and more recently his blessing.

Let me put it like this. You would probably not want to buy a used car from Jacob!

More than that, his trickery was so unnecessary. It was God's plan to give him these things all along, for so it had been revealed to his mother Rebekah at his birth.

What was his sin? One was impatience. He didn't want to wait on God, and so he took matters into his own hands. Perhaps you've been there and done that.

Whatever your flaws, find encouragement in Jacob.

The God we meet in the Bible sees beyond what we are to what by grace we may become. Isn't that a lovely thought? Our God is a god of transformation.

But, back to Jacob and his dark night of the soul, his 'three o'clock in the morning' moment, told about in today's passage.

It appeared that his best laid plans had come to naught. He was fleeing the very land he was to inherit. His blessing was going down the tube.

More than that, he was separated from the familiar, from his family, and yes it seemed from God.

But, as so often is the case: **God's light shines the brightest when our candle has gone out.**

Trouble can be and often is the pathway for receiving God's blessings.

Case in point is a man I heard about last week who almost died from the coronavirus.

It was out of this terrible experience that the Lord became real in this man's life. Adversity became the pathway to blessing.

I wonder if you have ever had anything like this happen in your life or in the life of someone you know?

Well, this is just what happened to Jacob. His 'three o'clock in the night' moment set him on a brand-new path.

Instead of Jacob the trickster he became Jacob the faithful . . . the one who at the end of today's passage takes on the mantle of covenant bearer and pledges to return a 10th of all that God blesses him with.

More than that, it was out of this experience, this dark night of the soul, that he was given a wonderful glimpse of God. Specifically, a ladder with angels ascending and descending with God (perhaps the pre-incarnate Christ) at the top.

In fact, I want to suggest, **Jacob himself was destined to be a part of this ladder.** What do I mean by this? Let me explain.

Jacob's ladder might be better be seen as a ziggurat, a tower the ancients build in their quest to climb up into heaven and so be united with God.

Where have we heard of such a tower before?

Well, earlier in Genesis when the human family began to multiply and attempted to build just such a tower.

What did God do in response?

He confused their tongues and caused them to disperse. The unfinished structure they left behind became known as the **Tower of Babel**. It witnessed to the fact that humans are NOT able to climb up into heaven through their own unaided efforts. Grace, God's grace, is required.

What does Jacob see in his vision? Well, God Himself putting into place just such a tower.

What man could not do God intended to do. But how?

Well, ultimately it would be through one of Jacob's offspring that earth and heaven would be bridged. That offspring was of course Jesus of the tribe of Judah. Judah was one of Jacob's future sons.

Jesus is 'God with us', Immanuel. He Himself bridges the gap between earth and heaven precisely because He is God and He is man. In Him, we are never alone. Cosmic alienation ended, full stop.

But we are not yet at the end of our story. The God who is with us is also the God who is in us. The Holy Spirit is nearer than our breath, closer than our thoughts, and ever remains at work in our lives . . . yes, even in times of pandemic, civil unrest, and personal struggle.

"I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest."
These are more than God's words to Jacob. They are God's words to you and me in the Gospel of Christ.

In my youth there was a little chorus that sums up this promise very nicely. It goes like this:

**No never alone no never alone
He promised never to leave me never to
leave me alone
No never alone no never alone
He promised never to leave me
never to leave me alone.**

Never alone. Take these words with you when you leave home each morning, consider them when you lie down to sleep at night (hopefully with something more than a stone for a pillow!) , cling to them should you ever find yourself alone and awake at 3 o'clock in the morning on a real dark night.