

Sunday, September 24, 2017 -- Narrative Lectionary Year 4-3 –

“Creation Consciousness: The Ladder of Creation” © Rev. Seth Jones

This morning we bear witness to Jacob cheating his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance, and deceiving his father, Isaac, into thinking he is Esau. Then we join Jacob while he is on the run from his family, having destroyed his relationship with his brother and ruined any trust there may have been between himself and his father.

Jacob runs because he fears for his life. He has a high degree of certainty Esau will kill him, and it is likely that Isaac put the hit out on him. And so, like any good Mafia story, Jacob runs, having secured the inheritance of the father over and against his brother. In the place where Jacob’s father, Isaac, was nearly sacrificed by Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, in that place, Jacob lays his head upon a rock for a pillow and falls asleep.

With the immediacy of brokenness and the history of dysfunction weighing upon him, the millstone of what he has done and what he has been subject to in a long history of messed up people, Jacob dreams:

*and behold, a stairway was set on the earth, and its top touched the heavens. And behold, angels of God were going up and going down on it.*

The ladder between Heaven and Earth is placed where Jacob dreams, a dream in a place of exile, of coercion, of deception, of spiritual desolation.

And this is where the Lord comes to Jacob. The messengers of God come to us in the midst of our suffering, whether that suffering is self-inflicted or inflicted by others.

In other words, God’s blessing for Jacob, for God’s people, for us, will complete itself regardless of what we have done and who has done it to us. For it is within our desolation that God makes God’s self known to us. Hear the blessing Jacob receives:

<sup>13</sup> *And behold, Yahweh was standing beside him, and he said, “I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you were sleeping I will give to you and to your descendants. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, and to the east, and to the north and to the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and through your descendants. <sup>15</sup> Now behold, I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you.” <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep<sup>1</sup> (Gen 28:12-16)*

This is an awesome and shocking thing, isn't it?

Listen to how Jacob responds:

*“Surely Yahweh is indeed in this place and I did not know!” <sup>17</sup> Then he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! [This is nothing else than the house of God], and this is the gate of heaven!”<sup>2</sup>*

We have been talking about Creation and the consciousness God intends for us within God's created order. Three weeks ago, we looked at God's good, relational, creative ways and how we are also called to these ways because we are created beings in the image of god.

Last week, we saw that resilience, the ability to survive through disaster and trauma, is hard-wired into God's creation.

This week, we are looking at the power of dreams to reconcile the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (Ge 28:12–16). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>2</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (Ge 28:16–17). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Dreams in Scripture have the power to alter and create new realities. Throughout Scripture, dreams are essentially prayers for wisdom and knowledge. And what is wisdom but the ability to make decisions well in God's created order?

Creation is where God's action and ours meet and complete themselves. Wisdom is the alignment of our action with God's desire for all of Creation. This is what dreams in Scripture point us toward.

The power of dreams is made clear by the outcome of Jacob's dream on this mountain. Before I tell you what happens on this mountain, Mount Moriah, I want to let you know that dreams always have a literal component and a mythic, or mystical, component.

Jacob's dream, in the literal sense, led to the Jewish people to believe the hill upon which Jacob had his dream was the actual 'Gate of Heaven', and so it is here that Solomon builds his Temple. That is why this is the "Temple Mount".

The Temple Mount also is claimed by the Christians, where during the Crusades they took the Dome of the Rock as their representation upon the 'Gate of Heaven'. The Muslim faith claims inheritance here, too, and the presence of the Al'Aqsa Mosque is one of their great holy sites – for the same reasons it is for us and for the Jews. All because of Jacob's dream of the ladder.

The ladder of Jacob becomes truly meaningful when we take the mystical view. See, the danger in the brokenness of the world and the dysfunction in our relationships is that those are the places where we lose hope, where we share the desolation of Jacob. It becomes especially difficult if we ourselves, like Jacob, are the agents of brokenness. Restoration, healing, reconciliation become very difficult when we are the ones who broke, harmed, or separated ourselves from others.

A mystical view of Jacob's ladder gives us access and insight into the way through to seeing God in a place where we didn't even know God would be present with us. In the mystical tradition, there are many ways to construct Jacob's ladder.

There is the ladder of awareness, the rungs of which are: *ignorance, dawning awareness, awakening, perception, transformation, discernment, action.*

There is the ladder of living things: *plants, insects, crawling and creeping things, swimming things, reptiles, mammals, human beings.*

There is the ladder of personhood: *infant, child, adolescent, young adult, adult, elder.*

The ladder I am interested in today is the Ladder of Creation. The Ladder of Creation moves from the physical world to the spiritual world. This, I believe, is the ladder we are called to pay attention to with Jacob. The Ladder of Creation provides the gateway for the created order to access the spiritual realms, and for the spiritual realms to access the created order.

Why would this be necessary? Why would God put this ladder in place? I believe we are given this story because God's work in Creation is reconciliation. I believe the goal of Jacob's ladder is reconciliation.

Is not our suffering caused by disunity, the breaking of our relationship with one another, with God, and with Creation itself?

Just as Jacob's dream comes to him in the midst of suffering and brokenness, so also does God's desire for reconciliation come to us in our suffering and brokenness.

Reconciliation happens within creation itself, and at least today, the presence of Jacob's ladder suggests that the purpose of the Divine in Creation is to reconcile all things to God, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:

*<sup>18</sup> And all these things are from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19</sup> namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (2 Co 5:18–19). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The Ladder of Creation moves from the personal and individual experience to the surrounding environment to the shared resources of the planet to the awareness of the cosmos to the experience of the universal.

We think of this as an upward movement – the ladder of Jacob goes ‘up’ to Heaven. But reconciliation, at least according to Paul, happens in the other direction as well.

Remember, the Gateway to Heaven is not ‘up there’. It is, according to Jacob’s experience, ‘right here’, wherever separation and brokenness are present. Right there, in Creation itself, not away from it, God is also present.

Think about this for a moment.

What if the angels who we perceive are coming down to us on the Ladder of Creation are, from their perspective, climbing up the ladder?

What if God’s created order is an upward movement for the spiritual beings of God’s creation?

What if our suffering is a perception problem, first and foremost, and we have reversed the ladder?

What if Creation, our experience in this place, in this physical body, in this world, is in fact the top of the ladder?

What if this is, for you and for me, the ‘Gateway to Heaven’ right here?

Another person who sleeps a lot in Scripture is Nathaniel. All we know of Nathaniel in Scripture is that he likes to sit under a fig tree. His story is in John 1. Philip finds him there and says, *“We have found the Messiah! It is Jesus from Nazareth.”*

Nathaniel says, *“Nazareth! What good can come from Nazareth?”*

Philip says, “Come and see!”

When Jacob describes the place where he dreams as the ‘Gateway to Heaven’, it is important to understand Jacob does not think of Heaven like we do. Heaven, in the Jewish sense, is the place and way God provides for God’s people. It is a Creation-

centered understanding. Heaven is what can be immediately experienced here and now, in God's created order, through God's will and power.

The reason I tell you that is because, when Nathaniel meets Jesus, Nathaniel is surprised Jesus knows stuff about Nathaniel.

Jesus then says to Nathaniel:

*"Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these!"*<sup>51</sup> *And he said to him, "Truly, truly I say to all of you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."*<sup>4</sup>

Jesus becomes the new Gateway to Heaven. And in becoming the Gateway to Heaven, Jesus also becomes the Gateway to Creation.

Why?

So that all things may be reconciled to God. Creation becomes the theater upon which God reconciles the world to God's self. The Ladder of Creation is intended to transform this world for God's sake. The presence of Christ is meant to transform us so we might be 'ambassadors of peace and reconciliation' for God's sake.

Jacob's dream on the mountain is the dream of reconciliation. As Jacob's story moves forward, the lands that had been separated in the time of Abraham are rejoined by Jacob. As the story progresses, Jacob wanders the desert in the same way his grandfather, Abraham, did.

Finally, Jacob comes to the land boundaries of his brother, Esau. Jacob needs to cross the land to fulfill the promises of God. At the boundary of his brother's land, one of God's messengers wrestles with Jacob in the night-time. After their match, which is a draw, the angel names Jacob Israel, *'the one who struggles'*.

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<sup>4</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (Jn 1:50–51). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The next morning, Jacob awakens and prepares to meet his brother. Esau thinks Jacob has come to conquer him. Jacob is pretty sure his brother is going to kill him when he sees Jacob.

But look at what happens when the Ladder of Creation is working upon Jacob and Esau:

*1*And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. *2*And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. *3*He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

*4*But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. *5*And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” *6*Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. *7*Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. *8*Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company<sup>a</sup>that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor in the sight of my lord.” *9*But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”

*10*Jacob said, “No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. **For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.** *11*Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” Thus he urged him, and he took it. (Gen 33:4-11)

Reconciliation is the work of God in Creation. And reconciliation is the work of Heaven on earth. “On earth, as it is in heaven” we pray every Sunday. Even though Jacob has destroyed his family, his dream shows him that even God is in this place. On a hill in a place we now call Jerusalem, where Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, tried to kill his father, Isaac, where three faiths now worship the same God understood in very different ways,

the Ladder of Creation came down (or came up) to a man who separated, who lied, who cheated, who stole. But because God wants to fulfill God's desire for all Creation *in Creation* Jacob becomes an instrument of reconciliation.

What does reconciliation look like?

Whenever and wherever we look upon the other and say to them,

*“For I have seen your face and it is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.”*

May it be so for all of us, and may that moment be where we say with Jacob,

*“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven.”*

Amen.