

Don't Back Down
Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25

Rev. Kenneth M. Locke, Interim Pastor
St. Paul United Church of Christ; New Bremen, OH
July 23, 2023; 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Before we get too far into our text, let's back up and catch up. In our lesson last week, the twins Esau and Jacob were born. Esau is the elder of the two.

When they grow up, they have very different personalities. Esau doesn't care about the future. He wants instant gratification. Jacob, on the other hand, cares very much about the future but he's also very conniving, manipulating, grasping. In fact, Jacob manipulates Esau out of his birthright, which is a big deal. The first-born gets more of the property than the second born. But Jacob connives it out of Esau with a little stew.

This time, though, he's gone too far. Jacob has tricked his father Isaac into giving him, Jacob, the blessing due to the firstborn. This is very, very serious. In the ancient world a father's blessing was extremely serious. They took it so seriously Esau now wants to kill Jacob. Fearing for his life, Jacob flees to Mesopotamia, to his mother's people.

Along the way, he has to spend the night out in the open. Remember, the ancient world was lit only by fire. No flashlights. If you're out in the open when the sun goes down, you're stuck until morning. So, Jacob makes the best of it and goes to sleep.

Jacob dreams of a ladder stretching up to heaven. The Hebrew word can also mean ramp or stair. The point is he dreams of a path connecting the earth to the heavens. The angels of God are going up and down it.

In the morning he calls the place Bethel: House of God. Beth means 'house.' El means 'God.' Beth-el. House of God.

Of course, this story gives us the famous children's song, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder." It's a good song. Encouraging. It makes us want to keep striving, to keep climbing towards God.

But what if we're tired? What if we're scared of heights? Is it worth it?

About ten years ago, I spent a couple of weeks hiking on the Appalachian Trail. I walked a little over 400 miles with a 40 lb pack from GA to VA. There were times when the trail seemed more like a path for mountain goats. Times when a ladder would have been handy. And lots of times when it seemed to go on and on forever.

The temptation to look back and look down was constant. The temptation to stop and rest was at every turn. The voice inside my head telling me to chuck it all got louder and louder every day.

Man, is this worth it? Will the view from the top be that good? Will the sense of accomplishment, the thrill of conquering nature and stretching my limits, will it be worth it? I was tired, I was sore, I was hungry all the time. Man alive, should I just give up?

This must have been what the Romans were asking Paul. Is it worth it, Paul? Is it worth dying to the flesh, dying to our ego, dying to our dreams of glory and power and importance? Is climbing this ladder really worth letting go of everything our culture says matters? Is putting God first in our lives really worth it?

Paul says Yes. Yes, it is worth it. Paul says letting go of all those human desires is absolutely worth it. We are not meant to be slaves of every passing impulse and emotion, constantly falling off the ladder and starting over. No.

We are meant for lives of loving sacrifice to God and others. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, we are called to climb the ladder to the top and dwell with Christ forever.

Is it hard? Sometimes. Is there suffering? Of course. Letting go of our desire for revenge, status, praise? Of course that's hard.

But Paul is very clear. He thinks the hardship of climbing the ladder is nothing compared to the view from the top. It's nothing compared to living with Jesus. No matter the struggle, reaching the top is absolutely worth it. That's Paul's message to the Romans and to us. Get up. Climb the ladder. Being at the top is absolutely worth it.

Friends, where are you on this ladder of faith? Are you on the ground? A few rungs up? Are you nearing the top?

How are you feeling? Are you looking up with joy and expectation? Are you looking down? Does it make you dizzy, like maybe you're afraid of heights? Are you getting tired? Maybe too tired to go on?

The good news of God is we have the Spirit of God in us. It's not a spirit of fear or despair. A spirit of slavery to our human impulses. No! The Spirit we have is a Spirit of joy, propelling us upwards. It's the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of adoption. We are siblings of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is drawing us up the ladder to claim our rightful place with Christ for eternity.

Beloved, this is how much God loves us. Thanks be to God.
Amen!