

INI

Genesis 28,10-19

Trinity 19 — 11 October 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Old Testament lesson from Genesis, the First Book of Moses, which was read earlier:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven.”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Today, scientists use the Hubble Space Telescope to peer into the vast reaches of outer space. In addition to trying to unlock the secrets of the universe, they also look for other planets which might be like our earth and support life. On earth there are radio telescopes that pick up the signals from the stars and try to find out if there is other intelligent life besides us in the universe. To date, these efforts have not met with success.

In the nonscientific realm there are the people who search the skies for UFOs. There are the people who believe that ancient civilizations on earth were created by aliens from outer space, and some believe that Jacob’s dream was his close encounter of the fourth kind, that is, an encounter with aliens. There are TV shows and science fiction and films that dwell on this theme.

Both science and fiction speak to mankind’s longing to see if we are not alone in the universe.

Our text for today says that we are not alone. There is a spiritual dimension which we cannot see, and in this dimension God's lives in light inaccessible (1 Timothy 6,16). But God has broken through that dimension to reach out to us. Our text tells us about God coming to Jacob. He comes with promise and assurance. And Jacob named the place where he had slept "Bethel," that is, "God's House." This dream also speaks about a ladder between heaven and earth – a connection between earth and heaven. While Jacob's dream was a one time event, this other connection will last forever. This connection is none other than Jesus. He too comes to us with promise and assurance. Jesus too gives us an everlasting house.

This brings me to my sermon theme for today, "**Our Eternal Bethel.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) A Dream With Promise And Assurance**
- 2) Jesus – Our Ladder To Heaven;** and,
- 3) Our Eternal Bethel**

1) A Dream With Promise And Assurance. Jacob left the house of his father Isaac in Beersheba. But his going was not voluntary. He was a twin, and he had taken the blessing that should have gone to his older brother Esau. Esau was angry and wanted to kill Jacob. So Isaac told Jacob to go to Haran, or Paddan-Haran, the area in which Haran was located. Abraham's relatives still lived in Haran, and there Jacob was to get a wife from his uncle, Laban. Jacob was to stay there until Esau's anger had cooled.

Today we might say that Jacob was a fugitive, a refugee fleeing from a bad situation. He had to leave his father's house and go on a journey that would take weeks and weeks.

After a journey of several days he came "to a certain place," and gathered some stones to make a shelter for himself because night was coming. He took one stone for a headrest and fell asleep.

It was then that God came to him in a marvellous dream. There was a ladder or a stairway reaching from where Jacob lay up to heaven.

The Hebrew word used here, used only once in the entire Old Testament, could mean either a “ladder” or a “stairway.” It really does not matter a lot.

What was amazing was that God’s angels were going up and down the ladder, coming down from heaven and going up to heaven. At the top of the ladder was the LORD Himself, He Who created the universe and had given the promise of the coming Messiah to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob’s grandfather and father.

The angels were there to do God’s will. The ladder represented the uninterrupted communion between earth and heaven. The angels were to mediate the needs of God’s children on earth. For example, Psalm 103 speaks of the angels:

Bless the LORD, you His angels,
Mighty in strength, who perform His Word,
Obeying the voice of His word.
Bless the LORD, all you his hosts – another word for angels! – ,
You who serve Him, doing His will. (Psalm 103,20-21).

After His temptation in the wilderness, for example, angels ministered to Jesus (Matthew 4,11). Of the angels, Jesus said of God’s little children, that their “angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18,10).

Now God renewed that promise to Jacob. He told Jacob that he would give him the land first promised to Abraham. He told Jacob that He would bless His seed so that they would be a numerous as “the dust of the earth.” He told Jacob that He would be with him to “keep” him or protect him and that He would bring Jacob back to this land.

When he awoke, Jacob was overwhelmed. He had just camped in the wilderness outside of a city. There was nothing particularly special about where he had camped or even anything special about the stones he had gathered. But in the midst of his journey, far from his father’s house and far from where he was going, God had come to him. God had reassured Jacob that God was with Jacob.

Jacob took the stones he had gathered and made an altar to God. He poured a bit of oil on the stones and named the place “Bethel,” or, “House of God,” because God had appeared to him at that place.

Jacob was a sinner. But he had repented of his sin and had stood in great need of divine grace. He was deeply grieved over leaving his father’s house and was apprehensive about the future.

God came to Jacob with promise and assurance. He had come near to Jacob with that promise and assurance. That promise and assurance point forward 1700 years into the future towards an even greater promise and assurance, to the coming Savior, Jesus. For,

2) Jesus – Our Ladder To Heaven. In the beginning of John’s Gospel, we see Jesus gathering His disciples at the beginning of His ministry. To one of those disciples, Nathanael, Jesus said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.
(John 1,51)

As any good Jew, Nathanael would have known his Old Testament and known that the description of angels ascending and descending would have referred to the story of Jacob’s dream.

But what is Jesus saying here?

First of all, He is the “Son of Man.” In another night vision, the prophet Daniel saw the Son of Man coming before the “Ancient of Days” to receive from Him

Dominion, glory and a Kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His Dominion is an everlasting Dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed. (Daniel 7,13-14)

Jesus says that Daniel was speaking of Him, the Messiah to come, Who in Jesus, has come. His Kingdom of grace and promise and forgiveness shall last forever, and even the gates of hell shall not be able to prevail against it (Matthew 16,18).

Secondly, when God promised Jacob that his seed would be blessed and become numerous, he used the singular word for “seed,” and not “seeds.” Paul commented on this promise first made to Abraham, and then renewed to Isaac and Jacob. In the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians we read:

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ. (Galatians 3,16)

God’s Old Testament promises always point toward Jesus.

Thirdly, Jesus is saying that He is the ladder, the bridge between heaven and earth.

Although at the time Nathanael could not have known it, Jesus will establish this bridge by living a sinless life and dying a death He did not deserve. On the Cross, Jesus established that bridge between heaven and earth by taking on Himself the sins of the world. His death paid the price for sin and gave the world the Word of reconciliation by which man and God are now at peace. In Jesus’ death the wall of sin, which separated God from His creation, was torn down, just as at the moment of Jesus’ death the veil in the Temple separating the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies was rent asunder. In Jesus’ resurrection we see the proof that Jesus’ sacrifice for sin was acceptable to God.

Jesus is now the only bridge to heaven itself. This bridge passes over the chasm which would have separated us from God – the chasm of sin, of death, and the power of the devil. Jesus is the one and only Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2,5) – between each of us and God.

In Jesus, God again renews His promise and assurance given to

Jacob so many, many years before. Jesus gives us His promise of His presence: “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28,20). Jesus promises to be with believers forever. Jesus gives us the promise of protection:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. (John 10,27-28)

Jesus promises that in the face of our old enemies – sin, death, and the power of the devil – we and all believers shall have eternal life, shall never perish, and have the complete assurance that so long as we follow the voice of the Good Shepherd we are always held in the protection and comfort of His hands.

But in all this, God also in Jesus has given to us the promise of an eternal dwelling place,

3) Our Eternal Bethel. As opposed to Jacob’s stone memorial which celebrated God’s coming to him, and which Jacob had called “God’s House,” Jesus has built for us a house that spans all time and all places.

Jacob’s stone memorial was established in a certain place. That place would from that time be known as “Bethel.” But in later years, rather than being God’s house, the unbelieving Israelites made it into a shrine to Baal. God later forbade the Israelites to make such stone memorial as Jacob had made, because the Israelites were erecting to Baal and other dead idols instead of to the living God. God showed himself to Jacob as a God who could be with him wherever he went – in Beersheba or Haran or any place in between. Later the Israelites thought that Bethel was a place of magic where they could “capture” God like they could “capture” an idol. Bethel had belonged to the northern kingdom of Israel and King Jeroboam made a golden calf there (1 Kings 12,29). Under the reign of King Josiah the sanctuary to idols at Bethel was destroyed, probably about 608 BC about a year before Josiah himself died and Judah again fell into idol worship. Needless to say, unbelieving Israel did not honor what Bethel stood for, that is, God’s House.

Needles to say, not only was it not eternal but it was always stained with sin and death.

We have a completely different picture when we look to Jesus.

Firstly, Jesus said to His disciples:

Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will also come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14,1-3)

Jesus promises that He is preparing an eternal, incorruptible Bethel for us in heaven. This is the heavenly Jerusalem, to which we as pilgrims go forward in this early life, always following the voice of the Good Shepherd who has gone ahead of us.

Secondly, while God gave a promise of a specific piece of land to Jacob, in Christ this promise finds its fulfilment not in earthly real estate but in a heavenly Jerusalem. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us:

By faith Abraham lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations and whose architect and builder is God... they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. (Hebrews 11,9-10+16a)

The Old Testament promise of land finds its perfect fulfilment in Jesus, and He has gone on ahead to prepare an eternal heavenly city, a heavenly Bethel that is untouched by sin, or sickness, or death. The end of our salvation is not to be found in any earthly city, be it Rome or Jerusalem or Constantinople, or even Moscow, which one time called itself the "third Rome."

Thirdly, Jesus gives us an earthly Bethel that is not tied to any specific earthly location – His body the Church. Here Jesus nourishes us through His Word. He calls us to new life through Holy Baptism. He

reminds us to daily come to Him for forgiveness of sins so that we might walk in newness of life before Him. He gathers us around His communion table. He comes to us as we read His Word in our devotions at home, at we hear His Word in church. Indeed, Jesus promises that: “where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in their midst” (Matthew 18,20). In His earthly Bethel, the Church, we have a ladder that goes from where we are and stretches into Heaven.

Conclusion. Jesus is that ladder. He is the One Who has broken into our world to tell us we are not alone in the universe. He is the One Who speaks Words of promise and assurance. He is the One Who gives us an eternal Bethel, in which He calls us to daily repentance, in which He forgives us our sin, so that we might always follow the voice of our Good Shepherd to our eternal Bethel. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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