



# “When Heaven and Earth Touch”

Text: Genesis 28:10-19a

*a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Jacob. The Schemer. The Usurper. That is what Jacob’s name meant and it was who he was. He had spent his whole life up to this point scheming for the blessings that belonged to his brother, Esau, and through opportunity and manipulation he received both the birthright and his father’s blessing that both rightfully belonged to Esau. And so, after stealing his father’s blessing, he is now having to run from his brother’s wrath. His scheming and usurping has left him separated from his beloved mother, from his father, from his home, and now here he is lying on the ground with a stone for a pillow.

A life on the run. That is what life has become for Jacob at this moment in time. And, probably, most of us know what it is like to live life on the run. Some of us are running from our past, trying to escape guilt, regret, failures, disappointments. Some are trying to get away from the pain, losses, and brokenness of life. Sometimes we just want to leave behind the parts of our lives or ourselves we dislike.

Other times we are running toward a future that we desire; running in search of something or someone new; a new job, a new relationship. Maybe it is the search for answers. Who am I? What is life all about? What is my purpose? Others, driven by a mid-life crisis, chase after meaning and youth. Surely what we are looking for is out there in the future somewhere if we can just get there.

And then there is the everyday life that seems to require us to live at a breakneck speed due to our obligations to work, to family, even to the church. The busyness of life takes over and has us running. Demands and expectations chase us. We tell ourselves, "As soon as I get caught up." Does it sound familiar?

I'm sure we could each tell a story of life on the run. While the details may be specific to us, it is really just another version of Jacob's story. A life spent running has us facing forward, living on the horizontal axis. Reality and life are limited to the physical universe; time, space, matter, energy. And that is truly sad, because we miss the spiritual and transcendent aspects of life, the vertical axis, when we are running. But, fortunately, we serve a God that breaks into the chaos we have established in our running.

Like Jacob, life on the run eventually takes us to that certain place somewhere between Beer-Sheba and Haran. This is not so much a geographical location as it is a spiritual orientation. Jacob has left Beer-Sheba, the people and place that are familiar. He is not yet in Haran, the new place. He is in a certain place, an in between place, a place of liminality, neither here nor there. This is the place where we are most vulnerable and open to seeing and hearing God in new ways.

That certain place is a nighttime place. It is a darkness illumined only by the unknown. It is a place of darkness, but it is a place where God-dreams can now come and illumine the darkness and lead the way. I once read that Enlightenment is not about what you know but who you know, trust, and follow. It happens not in the mind but in the depths of the heart.

This darkness is a hard place, full of stones, yet it is a place of grace. When the sun has set and darkness takes over you can no longer go on, you can only stop and lie down. It is a point of surrender, but not a place of giving up. The darkness teaches us that we are no longer in control of our own destiny. Now God can appear and speak. We see with new eyes and hear with new ears. The vertical axis of God's life, Jacob's ladder, intersects with the horizontal axis of our life and running. That point of intersection is always an awesome place, the house of God, and the gate of heaven.

Jacob's ladder reveals the connection between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, the uncreated and the created. It appears at every moment of our life, even life on the run, because Jacob's ladder is not in a physical location. It was within him. It was not a vision but a dream.

Through Jacob, God reveals that the ladder of God's love, God's life, and God's connection to us is found deep within ourselves, a place so deep that it is seen in the gift of a dream. We call it Jacob's ladder, but it is not just for Jacob. It is God's ladder placed in each one of us.

The miracle is not that God shows up and breaks into our lives. That is always happening. The miracle is that we recognize it within ourselves. The ladder is revealed in the lives of those running away, in those who have lived up to their names, in the hard, stony places, in the in-between places - in the places we never wouldn't have expected. "Surely the Lord is in this place."

A ladder. A ladder with angels going up and down. A ladder with angels doing nothing other than going up and down. Or so it seems. But aren't they really bringing connection over and over again? Conveying to the person who experiences this dream that earth and heaven are connected and the connection permits movement between earth and heaven.

And God. God self-reveals in this passage. It is the first time that God addresses God's self as Yahweh, the LORD. This grounds the relationship, the covenantal relationship between God and Jacob; a covenant established generations earlier with Abraham and Isaac, now speaks with Jacob about an enduring connection extending to his descendants. And who are those descendants? Ordinary people, like you and me. We are the means for God's widespread blessing. God announces earlier that. "all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring." Earlier Esau cries out, "have you only one blessing, father? Bless me also, father!" The coveted blessing that nearly destroys this family is countered with God's alternative vision. Rather than a limited blessing won through defeat and humiliation of others, God extends a prodigal blessing to all the families of the earth through Jacob and his descendants. We are all prodigals, blessed by the loving Father.

Jacob vows to return to this place of connection. His vow signals the importance of returning to the place where we encounter God most fully. Although Jacob continues on his journey to Haran, he remains oriented to this place he now calls Bethel, which means “house of God”. And isn’t that why you return here each week? For Christians, Jacob’s vow resonates with our weekly returning from the journey of our daily lives to the place that we encounter God most fully through worship, word, and sacrament. Here, in this place, you should find the connection between heaven and earth.

What parts of your life are you living on the run? What are you searching for? What are you running from? Stop running. Trust in that certain place between Beer-Sheba and Haran, that place where heaven and earth touch. Let the sun set. Don’t be afraid of the dark places for God’s ladder is and always has been within you. No matter who you are, the circumstances you face, or where you may run, the ladder of connection goes with you. It is part of you. It is in that sacred spot within where heaven and earth touch. Wake up and see that the dream has come true. “Surely the Lord is in this place and I now know it.”

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