

*Genesis 28:1-19a*  
*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

*word count: first service: 1,695*  
*second service: 1,864*

Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham, and he would be known as the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob holds a place of high esteem, but his character was flawed.

If you are tuning in from last week's episode, you will remember that Jacob took advantage of his older brother in order to get Esau to sell him his birthright. He successfully conspired with his mother to deceive his father into giving him the blessing of a first-born son by dressing up in a hairy garment so that Isaac, who didn't see well, would think smooth-skinned Jacob was instead the hirsute Esau. When we meet up with him today, Rebekah has just advised him to head out on the lam and chill at her brother's place until Esau cools off.

Commentator Paul Harvey once said, "Let me describe him this way. He's the kind of guy who follows you into a revolving door and comes out ahead of you."

Jacob was simply what we would call human. In the Bible, when the Deity reveals itself to human beings, those people seem larger than life and purer than snow for being chosen. We read about a God that speaks to a super-human recipient; a hero in a wondrous setting. But Jacob robbed his brother of his birthright, and in his cunning and deceit was "looking out for number one," to paraphrase a particularly obnoxious book title that has thankfully passed into obscurity. (*Looking Out for # One*, by Robert Ringer.)

Jacob is so untrustworthy that he needs to get out of town for a while. He goes to a desolate and bleak place. We all know these places. We have all gone to empty places, we have seen dark places in our lives, and so we know where Jacob is even if we can't describe the particular landscape. Jacob has been human. Jacob has wandered into a place that seems far away from where other people live their lives in peace. He is not a pilgrim, because he is not on a particular quest. He is just a poor, lonely traveler walking everyday through an empty place.

On my own way, I remember what it feels like to walk a path where nothing seems to grow; one that seems to have no definable purpose. All of us walk a path like Jacob's from time to time. If we are fortunate enough to believe that we are pilgrims and seekers where the journey is more important than the destination, that journey isn't so tiring or frustrating as it must have seemed for Jacob.

Jacob wasn't a pilgrim. He was a wanderer, a nomad, and so, when the sun went down and darkness came, his rest was a stone. A hard stone that he placed under his head before joining the emptiness and darkness in sleep.

But this night, Jacob would dream. This night something would awaken in him. An open sanctuary of rock and hard ground under a night sky would open the chapel in his mind in his dream state, and his second mind would receive God's presence.

"And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!"

A ladder from earth to heaven, like the stairway to heaven in the ziggurat or temple, where a priest would ascend to the place where the holy resided. Except in this dream, earth could meet heaven with no intermediary, and someone as flawed as Jacob could be inspired by such a dream to believe that more was yet possible.

Author Paulo Coelho talks about the “second mind.” He says that there is always an inner dialogue going on within us. So, even as you hear me speak now, another dialogue is happening inside your head. “Who is here today?” “I wonder how so-and-so is doing?” “I can really feel this baggage that I brought into this room today.” “Will things get better?” “I want to function better in the world than I am right now.” And, “So that’s where Led Zeppelin got the idea for that song.”

Coelho speaks of the second mind somewhat like a Jungian speaks of the subconscious. We are probably all aware that we function on two planes of thought at the same time. This “second mind” is how we converse or connect with our religious experience.

Jacob is clearly in his subconscious mind, his “second mind,” because the passage clearly states that this happened in a dream. “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,” says the voice of God to Jacob.

Jacob wakes and says, “Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it.” 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.” God’s presence was unexpected. God came to a bleak and forsaken place. And in our scriptural texts, the presence of God is almost always found in such bleak and forsaken places. Not important places, but among everyday people in humble places of life.

Jacob is like us. He is human. His experience demonstrates that in the most desolate place, the gloomy place, the emptiest place in our lives, there can be a shining bridge between heaven and earth. The conduit from where our minds feel stuck in a status-quo of our own making, to the place where we allow ourselves to see visions of what can be. The place came from Jacob’s sleep, his mind at rest.

Whatever Jacob had done that showed him to be human, even deceitful and untrustworthy, his Higher Power communicated with him. Jacob was forgiven his humanity, and grace descended down a ladder to hold him.

Grace comes down upon us in terrible times and in desolate places.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,” says God to Jacob, whose life others might describe in terms of today’s parable as more “weed” than “wheat.”

Barry Robinson, writing in “Keeping the Faith in Babylon,” talks about this story Jesus tells that inspires so much judgment of others:

“The point of the much disputed passage of the wheat and the weeds seems to be that God is far more patient than we would be and reflects the insistent message of Jesus: that there is far more grace in God than any of us will ever have hearts to receive. What is difficult about Matthew’s allegorical interpretation of the problem is that there is no suggestion of God’s extraordinary patience. Perhaps Matthew was less pleased than Jesus with God’s long-suffering and the text, as a result, mirrors well the church’s continuing discomfort with the radical message of Jesus.”

Grow, and let others grow in their own way. You are not the sower or the reaper, but what has sprung from the seed, imperfect yourself, and growing in the way you have been given to understand. Grace was extended to Jacob, and perhaps to you and even others like Jacob whom you might not believe to be deserving of grace. As a bumper sticker might sum up less profanely than another I am thinking of, “Weeds Happen.”

Today we read about Jacob and his dream. About how he fled from known to unknown, and even how he placed a rock under his head for a pillow and dreamed such dreams of angels on ladders. Who has found themselves as such an exile?

And Jacob fled from Beersheba to Haran...

Fled from all you ever knew and clung to; off into the great unknown, full of hope, promise, threat and fear. Fled from all that is comfortable and even unhealthy to all that is new and life-giving and difficult to achieve.

What is your “Beer-sheba?” What is it that you cling to? Security? Comfort? Health and well-being for both yourself and your family? How about the protection of ego, or even the worldview you have formed in which you can function within certain known parameters?

And what howling unknown waits before you? (Because there is at *least* one great unknown out there for all of us.) And, can you make it across the wilderness in one day? Or will you have to camp in the dark and trust only in something Greater?

In the wilderness like Jacob; in the dark and far from the comfortable place that life called you so suddenly to leave in order to experience the unknown, what will be your dreams there? Will you turn to despair and fear, or like Jacob, will you see through your dreams (those circuitous paths that meander through the collective unconscious of creation like rivers leading to Original Source) a presence that stands beside you, indeed has always been there; hearing, as did Jacob, the good news that God said, “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this place; for I will not leave you.”

We are all trying to live our dreams as best as we can—some of us are fortunate to have the paths our dreams have led us on cross in this place, this Bethel.

When Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” He said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God.”

My dream, and perhaps yours too, is to live the kind of full life that we all want to experience, but to live it while being reminded that I am a part of something else, something bigger than myself. The language I may use to describe it may be different than the language you may use, I don’t know, but we are essentially talking about the same thing. That which we call God is near us somehow, full of grace and experienced in the connection we have in community, reminding each other of exactly how precious life is. (End 1<sup>st</sup> service)

(Cue Jill—second service--#606 “Nearer, My God, to You”)

There was once a famous English actress whose flame shone brightly for a short while, and she died young. She grabbed hold of life fully and completely, knowing that her time was short. She thought of Jacob as the model of an imperfect person who took the living of life seriously, and she sat down and wrote words to a hymn about Jacob’s discovery of his connection to God. She wrote it for her pastor, who was compiling a Unitarian hymnal. “Nearer, My God to Thee” talks about loneliness, about being a wanderer in life, about Bethel, a sanctuary that can be found in any desolate place if you look for it. It speaks of the joy of discovering one’s connection to a Higher Power, and it foreshadows the grief and loss we feel during times of human transition when we are remind most of the preciousness of life.

Let’s just turn to # 606 in our hymnal and sing this together in our seats before closing with the Alleluia.

## Scripture for Sunday, July 20, 2008 Proper 11A

### Genesis 28:10-19a

*10* Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. *11* He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. *12* And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. *13* And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; *14* and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. *15* Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." *16* Then Jacob woke 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." *18* So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. *19* He called that place Bethel.

### Matthew 13:24-30

*24* He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; *25* but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. *26* So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. *27* And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" *28* He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" *29* But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. *30* Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." "