

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
July 17, 2011 5th Sunday After Pentecost

Heaven's Gate Opens!

Genesis 28:10–19	The stairway to heaven
Psalms 139:1–12, 23–24	God knows us and still loves us!
Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43	Weeds invade the garden.
Romans 8:12–25	We are God's children!

Informally before the sermon: I was really excited last week when I began preparing this sermon. The Old Testament lesson about Jacob, which continues our summer look at the ancestors who God used to shape and develop our faith, is filled with wonderful images. Jacob looks up and sees that the gate into heaven is open, and God is standing above it. Angels are walking and down a stairway between heaven and earth. God reiterates the promise made to Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. Heaven is a big subject these days with Todd Burpo's best-selling book, "Heaven Is For Real" being read by countless readers.

In Jacob's vision, the only thing missing from the way we often think about the gate to heaven is St. Peter standing at the gate asking golfers or bowlers or bankers about their lives.

The reading from Matthew is particularly timely as any of us who have a garden can relate to. How many of us are fighting a battle with the weeds this year? Jesus' parable says that when the weeds get so intertwined with the plants that it would harm the plants to get them out, to let the weeds grow and at the harvest time they can be separated out. In Jesus' story, of course, the weeds are those who follow the evil one, the good plants are the people who follow God and Jesus, and the "harvest time" is the end time when Jesus returns to gather his followers into God's kingdom for eternity. The end result is that the good and the bad are separated and sent their separate ways for all time.

And then there is Romans. Paul continues to teach the church in Rome, and us, about living a good life. A good life letting the Spirit lead us in following God's ways instead of following our own sinful instincts. He says that God's promises give us hope. Hope that lets us know that we, as followers of Jesus, will be amongst the

good crop when the harvesters come to, separate the weeds from the good crop. Paul says that this means that we have an obligation to follow God's path, including taking on the responsibilities of helping, sharing, caring, loving, and looking out for the interests of those who are not able to help themselves.

But, since I am going to stick with my plan to look at the Old Testament characters who brought us to where we are today, we are going to talk about Jacob and his vision.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

As you may remember from when we talked about Abraham, God made a promise to him about fathering a great nation of people who would follow God, occupying lands that God would point out to him, and producing descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. This promise was passed down to his son Isaac who was to pass it down to his oldest son, Esau. However, as we saw last week, Isaac's younger son Jacob conspired with this mother Rebekah, to obtain the promise from Isaac. Through some pretty inventive trickery, Jacob receives the blessing meant for Esau. That promise includes fathering the great nation, occupying land that others are now occupying, and having descendants as numerous as the stars.

So far this story is worthy of a place along with the other soap operas on afternoon TV, isn't it? The twists continue as we find that Esau is making plans to kill Jacob.

Rebekah learns of Esau's thoughts, and advises Jacob to get out of town. Knowing personally that the best wives come from the ancestral region of Haran where she came from, she also brings Isaac into the story again and tells him to tell Jacob not to take a Canaanite woman as his wife, but instead to travel and look for a wife in Haran.

Jacob is on his way.

Esau also leaves and just to spite his father and mother, searches out, and marries of all people Ishmael's daughter, a Canaanite woman. You remember Ishmael, he was Abraham's son by one of the maids, Isaac's half brother.

What stories our family has in our family storybook. It is almost hard to believe that you and I are here this morning worshipping the same God that they worshipped. In fact, if you and I had been writing the family history, we might well have left out some of the sordid

details that we have been hearing about. But this family story (hold up the Bible) doesn't do that. It tells it like it was and lets us see our ancestors as they really were.

That brings us up to Jacob's first night on his journey from Beersheba in Canaan to Haran. After many hours of travel, darkness set in, and it was unsafe to continue the journey, so he sought out a safe place to spend the night.

Finding an area that looked peaceful and safe, he prepared to settle down and sleep. He had no pillow, so he took a rock and placed it under his head the fell soundly asleep.

He may have been having the same problem you and I sometimes have when big things are happening in our lives. In just the past few weeks, Jacob has received the promise that he would be responsible for carrying out God's plan. He has conspired with his mother, tricked his father, cheated his brother, and been sent on a journey to find a wife. Not only that, his brother has threatened to kill him; he doesn't know that Esau isn't chasing him, and may well expect Esau to pop up from behind a rock at any time.

Probably none of us has ever had that much on our minds at one time. But, Jacob did as he lay his head on the rock and falls asleep.

His sleep is restful until suddenly he begins to dream. It was one of those dreams that are so clear that when you wake up you can remember every detail.

In his dream he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹

Then he wakes up, and it seems that God finally comes alive for him.

Ever since he was a little child he has been hearing about this God. He has heard the story about Creation and Adam and Eve in the garden. About how their disobedience

¹ Genesis 28:12-15 (my paraphrase)

brought sin and death into the world. About how powerful God is. He has heard the stories about his ancestor Noah and a boat full of animals who were the only ones saved by an angry God from complete destruction because they were loyal to God.

And, of course he has heard how God intervened in the life of his grandfather Abraham and his father, Isaac.

He has heard all these stories, and they are wonderful stories, but they are only stories. Until now. God has now become personal to Jacob. God is something more than just a character in a story; God is God, and God is his God!

The realization strikes as he awakens, thinks about his dream and thinks: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." ² He never expected to meet God there. In fact, he may never have even thought about meeting God personally. But he has, and he decides to name the place Bethel, which means "house of God." At the time of his vision, it was part of a Canaanite city named Luz, a place where almond trees grow.

God is now real to Jacob. He can place all those stories in the context of a God who personally cares about him. He can see why God was upset at Adam and Eve for their disobedience; he can see why God would reach out and help Abraham. He can understand the weight of accepting the promises that God made to his father Isaac. Maybe he even feels a hint of guilt over tricking his father and his brother.

Probably not, though. In his dream God blessed him and once again made the promise to him. Even though God must have known what had happened, God blessed him anyway. Why? Grace? Forgiveness? A little joke on God's part? We don't know. He now knows for certain that he is in the line of succession to God's chosen people.

Our God, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, Jacob's God is amazing!

That is the same God that we come to worship on Sunday mornings. Our God can't be boxed in; God surprises us time after time.

Back to our story for a minute. As far as the stairway to heaven and the angels ascending and descending? Well, it was part of Jacob's dream. Does it mean that there

² Genesis 28:16-17 (NIV)

are angels walking in our world, helping us out? It might. Our Bible contains many stories where angels play a big part. Usually as God's messengers, bringing news like the upcoming birth of the Savior to Mary.

What about the gate to heaven? It also was part of Jacob's dream. We don't know. Heaven is mentioned many times in the Bible. It is also mentioned many times in the Presbyterian Creeds. It is the place where God is and where Jesus is as well. The place where Jesus is waiting until God's plan is complete and he is sent back to the earth to judge all peoples, the quick and the dead. When we will be resurrected and brought into God's Kingdom to spend eternity.

This story about Jacob's ladder, as we call it, as well as many others in the Bible raise many questions in our minds. We are inquisitive people and we want to know. What will heaven be like? When will Jesus return? What happens to us when we die? Will we see our family and friends and recognize them?

Many, many questions that God does not answer in this book.

However, the questions that are answered are

- Will Jesus return and bring us into God's Kingdom? Yes
- Will we spend eternity with God? Yes
- Will it be wonderful? Yes.
- Will we live in God's Kingdom? Yes.
- Will we be with God and Jesus? Yes.
- Do we have to wait until God is ready? Yes.
- Can we figure out when Jesus will return? No.
- Can we be certain that There is but one overarching covenant of grace, one covenant people, one salvation, one return of Christ, one general resurrection and one Last Judgment. A resounding YES!

In an article in the Presbyterians Today magazine, *What can we hope for?* Lee C. Barrett sums it up this way:

Our tradition offers a hope that is both individual and corporate, both other-worldly and this-worldly. We are promised both "heaven" and "the kingdom." But what exactly will heaven or the kingdom be like? How are the two related? When or how will we experience them? In response to these questions the Reformed tradition advises a humble confession

of ignorance. We do not need to know the dimensions of heaven or the social arrangements of the kingdom. All we really require is the assurance that our future rests in God's loving hands.”

God’s promises are good enough for us and lead us, as they did Jacob, to a profound respect for God and acceptance of the hope that God provides. They lead us to live a life of following the Spirit instead of our sinful nature. A life where we will be the good crop when the harvesters come.

Amen.