



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

13th August 2023, 11th Sunday after Pentecost

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 stairway 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, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!

So, a bit of background into our Old Testament reading today: last week, we heard the first part of the story of Jacob, in which he cheats his brother Esau out of everything he was owed. Somewhat predictably, Esau isn't exactly happy with this state of affairs. I don't know what Jacob thought was going to happen, but Esau is furious. And, in his blind fury, he vows to kill his brother.

Rebekah warns Jacob of Esau's intentions and tells him to run away and stay with his uncle Laban until Esau's anger subsides. Which is where our story picks up today: Jacob is on the run, fleeing for his life from his murderous brother.

Now we're not told how Jacob was feeling, but I imagine not great. I imagine he is feeling a mix of fear, homesickness, no small amount of self-pity. After all he was the author of his own demise.

There's no evidence he was feeling bad for what he did to Esau, but if he had even a slither of empathy, he must have also been feeling a little bit guilty for the way he had treated his brother and deceived his father, Isaac.

And not only that, if you're going to behave badly, which Jacob did, you at least want to make sure it's worth your while, right? (that's my official ethical advice as your minister!) And yet, Jacob's immoral behaviour had apparently been for nothing. Here he was running for his life with nothing to his name and nothing to show for this birth right that he had supposedly stolen. He had received God's blessing from Isaac – and yet where were the signs of this blessing?

In fact, where were the signs that this God was with him at all? Jacob's words suggest that he *did not know* that God was with him. He felt abandoned, left utterly alone with his unforgiving and anxious thoughts with no one to comfort him.

To me there's something very human about Jacob's words that he did not know God was with him. Something very relatable about the situation. Ok, so most of us don't routinely betray our siblings or put animal fur on our arms to deceive our aging parents. But all of us will at some stage find ourselves on a journey into the unknown.

Whether journeys forced upon us by circumstances outside our control, or maybe like Jacob, journeys forced upon us by our own inadvertent actions. Journeys of guilt, shame, estrangement. Journeys of grief and loss. Journeys of fear and anguish. Journeys away from what was, from all that was comfortable and safe and familiar. Journeys into the unknown.

And this road can be incredibly lonely. Even when we're surrounded by people. Like Jacob, we look around and feel utterly alone. No comfort. No sign of blessing. Only our own unforgiving thoughts and swirling anxieties.

So, we might relate to Jacob who, travel-worn and exhausted, finds a place to rest his weary head. And in his poverty, he fashions a pillow for himself from an unforgiving rock and falls into an uneasy sleep where he has the most vivid dream.

The heavens, we're told, are opened, and a ladder rises, connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending on it. God himself comes alongside Jacob, reminding him of the promises and of the blessing and reassuring him that all will be well. For God is with him.

In the morning, after he wakes, Jacob takes the rock he slept on – a symbol of his poverty and homelessness – and erects there on the road a monument, a sign of God's abiding presence with him and a commitment to trust and to continue in hope despite the sobering circumstances.

The story is an assurance. An assurance – contrary to what we can perceive in the moment – that God *is* with us on the journey into the unknown. "Surely," Jacob says, "the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." His words are a prayer for us: *Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.*

...I don't know about you though, but to me there's something unsatisfying or at least challenging about the story. Why? Because real life isn't like this. Most of us don't get visions of heavenly escalators and angelic hosts as compelling evidence that God is with us in our hardships. Would that we did.

But maybe focusing on the heavenly dream is to miss the point of the story... You know, I was thinking about this: historically, the focus has tended to be on the dream, "Jacob's Ladder". So much so that it has become a cultural reference point, widely depicted in Western religious art.

But the description of the ladder is actually only one verse. The author seems more interested in the plain, ordinary rock that Jacob uses for a pillow. Over the course of the story, this every day, ordinary object takes on extraordinary significance. It becomes a reminder and a sign of the unconditional presence of God and of Jacob's resilient faith in the face of fear. Granted a rock doesn't have the same artistic appeal as the angelic escalator...

But the face remains that after the angelic hosts have faded away and the ladder has disappeared, it's the rock that is left. An ordinary trace of an extraordinary encounter.

You might be wondering about the image on your order of service. On our honeymoon, Alva and I spent a couple of weeks in Italy. And on one particular day, we went on a tramp and stumbled across this little stone monument on our way, a cairn. At the time, I had been mulling over this story of Jacob knowing that I was going to preach on it in a few weeks. I was struggling to work out where I was going to take the sermon.

It struck me at that moment that, for most of us, all we get on our journey of faith are the little stone monuments on the way. These little signs that someone has travelled this way before us. Signs that they have found God there on their way. And therefore, signs that God may be with us on our way, even though we do not perceive it in the moment. They become an invitation to prayer. An invitation to look behind the veil.

All we get are these traces. Traces of the faithful who have come before us following God by faith and by hope into the unknown.

I have no idea who made this little stone monument on the side of the road, or what led them to make it – probably boredom. But it was a reminder for me that while we were alone, actually we weren't alone. While we were journeying an unknown path, actually this path was well trodden. There was comfort in that.

There are many stories in the Old Testament like the one we heard today. Stories that tied specific places or specific rituals to significant events in the history of God's covenant relationship with Israel. These places and rituals were signs; etched into the landscape and etched into the minds of the people, reminding them of God's faithful presence with them in whatever circumstances they found themselves – even if they could not perceive it.

These signs were a call to remember that while they were on an unknown path, their ancestors had journeyed that way before them – and therefore they could trust that just as God had remained faithful back then, so God would remain faithful now. Their path was known and they were known.

That's really what this Communion meal is about. Like Jacob's stone pillar, these ordinary things of bread and grape juice are signs on the way of God's extraordinary presence with us, even when we do not perceive it. When we break this bread and drink this cup, we are invited to remember Jesus, who has gone before us; who has journeyed into the unknown; who has experienced fear and suffering and God-abandonment; Jesus who knows what it is to die.

The fact that Jesus has walked our way, doesn't make our journey easier. We still must all walk our own path for ourselves. But there is comfort in knowing that God has made the journey before us and by the Spirit that he is with us on our way. There is hope in trusting that our way is Christ's way and therefore that his victory over sin and fear and death will also be ours.

And so, we come to receive these ordinary, everyday things, that they become signs for us that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.