

The Gate of Heaven

TEXT: Genesis 28:10-22; 2Kings 5:1-14

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 17, 2025

My favorite biblical characters tend to be those who are the most complex; maybe because I find that complexity truer to actual human beings than those who are portrayed as purely good or purely evil. When characters in the Bible struggle to find their way; when they doubt, screw up, feel lost, make problematic choices; I see both myself, and virtually every person I've ever known, well-enough to notice the churning below the surface waters of life.

And yet here they are, despite all the mess, chosen to be characters in sacred story. Not just minor characters; and not just examples of what not to do or be. The arc of the Bible turns on them. God uses them anyway to help God's people find their way to love, community, and their true home. So, for the next three weeks, we're going to take a look at the first of my favorite, complex characters to emerge in the Bible: Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

The God of both Judaism and Christianity is often referred to as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." That, in itself, is an interesting study. Why does that brief genealogy stop with Jacob? Abraham had other sons besides Isaac, and Isaac was not the oldest. But God's blessing on Abraham nonetheless goes to Isaac rather than the others. Isaac has twins—Jacob and Esau. Esau emerged from the birth canal first, but again, the blessing flows to the younger. Jacob himself has twelve sons, so you would expect from the story that far that one of them would be chosen. We get a lengthy story in Genesis about Jacob's son Joseph, so maybe it's him? Nope.

Jacob's family marks a major shift in Israel's history. For the first time since Abraham, God's calling moves from identifying individuals as the recipient of God's call to an entire people. Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel; and God's blessing and calling to make God known and to extend God's blessing to all the nations of the earth rests on them all. Next week we'll see that transformation up close, as God changes Jacob's name to "Israel." But it's a fascinating plot point that the scandal-ridden Jacob is the one God literally wrestles to the ground to make that pivot.

Since this year we're focused on "calling," I'm going to skip over most of Jacob's youth—the fact that he was fighting his twin brother, Esau, literally in the womb, the deception and scheming to steal Esau's blessing and birthright—and focus on his adult transformation. It began when Jacob left home here in Genesis 28, followed by the moment he wrestled with his entire past and earned a new name, and concluding with the moment he saw his brother again with new eyes.

This week is the leaving home part, which culminates in a dream. So, let's zoom in and meet Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham who, in our reading this morning, is leaving home to find a wife from the family of his uncle Laban in the north. That seems like a reasonable thing to do, as we learn that Jacob's mother, Rebekah, is adamant that Jacob not marry one of the local Canaanite women as Esau had done.

But while Rebekah may have actually felt that way, the real reason she makes such a big deal about sending Jacob far away to Laban's settlement is that she got tipped off that Esau was going to kill Jacob. You see, Rebekah and Isaac had played favorites with the twins. Isaac preferred Esau, the eldest on a technicality. Rebekah preferred Jacob, the youngest only because both couldn't exit the birth canal at the same time. But that birth order gave Esau certain rights and privileges that Jacob would not get.

But rather than advocate for equal treatment, Rebekah devised a scheme, laid out in detail in the more famous story in chapter 27, which helped Jacob deceive his blind father and steal everything that mattered from Esau.

Isaac was quite old by that point and in ill health. It was clear that he was not long for this world, and so Esau plotted to kill his brother as soon as his father was gone. Rebekah gets wind of that and decides it is now urgent that Jacob take a long vacation far away and find a bride among their relatives. Isaac, who had sent a servant on a similar mission for himself when he was young, blessed the effort and Jacob quickly exited stage right.

Jacob has a multi-day trek in front of him and, with no Airbnb in sight, he camps out under the stars outside of a Canaanite city named Luz. He pulls up a rock for a pillow, goes to sleep and has a dream.

The dream is immortalized in the African-American Spiritual, “Jacob’s Ladder,” and has echoes of the old Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. In his dream, Jacob sees a ladder that connects earth to heaven and angels going up and down, a constant stream from one to the other. But it’s not just a visual dream. In the dream, God also speaks, (from the top of the ladder, in case someone wanted an ID), making the same promise to Jacob that was made to Jacob’s father Isaac and to his grandfather, Abraham:

“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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.”

Equally important is Jacob’s response to the dream. He wakes up, declares this must be a holy place, and renames the spot “Bethel,” which means “House of God.” He also takes the rock he used as a pillow, pours oil on it, and sets it up as a marker for the sacred spot. But despite Jacob’s intention of having it be a marker forever of his dream and the holiness attendant on that spot; Jacob’s stone pillow (or at least some stone believed to be that one) went on to have a life of its own, right to our present day.

It is believed to have made its way to Scotland, via Ireland, perhaps brought by the prophet Jeremiah—and don’t ask me how or why Jeremiah went to Ireland carrying a stone weighing over 300 pounds—but there went the legend, if not the actual stone, where it was used starting in the 8th century in the ceremonies to crown Scotland’s kings. It is now called the Stone of Scone, after the Abbey that first held it, or sometimes the Stone of Destiny. The English absconded with the stone in the 13th century, and took it to Westminster Abbey where it was used in the coronation of British royalty.

But some believe the stolen stone was a fake plant, since it is obviously quarried from Scottish sandstone, swapped out for the real one when Edward I invaded, with the real stone hidden somewhere. Maybe with the Ark of the Covenant and all your missing socks. Who knows.

But, after strong complaints and no small amount of shaming from Scotland, the Stone of Scone was reluctantly returned to Scotland in 1996 to sit beside the crown jewels of Scotland in Edinburgh Castle, but only on the condition that it go back to London for the crowning of future British Monarchs.

It was last trotted out on May 6, 2023 for the coronation of King Charles III and now it’s all tied up with the movement for Scottish Independence; and Jacob’s random pillow is now a source of conflict and has a cross carved in it to boot. Consider all that when you read the Commandment not to make any graven images.

I think Jacob made a fundamental mistake way back when; and it’s one that we still make pretty consistently today when it comes to spiritual and religious matters. To spot the potential error, all you have to do is ask the question of whether the dream or vision or whatever that Jacob had was meant to show him a behind-the-scenes look at that particular spot, which is what Jacob assumed, or a more universal vision of God’s presence and activity in any and every spot where Jacob might have lain his head.

Since God’s promise to Jacob at Bethel is contingent on following God’s call to be an agent of blessing for all the families of the earth, just like it was to Abraham and Isaac, I think it is the latter.

I don't think the dream meant that the particular spot that Jacob named Bethel was any more holy or special than any other spot. I think it was a vision of the constant interaction between God and the world in every location on earth. That's how all the families of the earth can be blessed—no one has to go anywhere else for it—it exists wherever we are. And any random stone, or any piece of this glorious creation, can be the gate to heaven that allows us to see it if we but stop and rest long enough.

And, to be clear, whether Jacob's dream is fact or legend doesn't matter when considering the truth of the story. The dream has been passed down across millennia to teach us something about the nature of God, the Created order, and the relationship between us. The message holds whether you believe it literally happened or whether it is a parable of some sort. For thousands of years people have checked the box marked "true," meaning that it has a truth to teach us. That's what I'm talking about.

I paired Jacob's story with the other, longer story of Naaman being healed of leprosy because I think Naaman's story shows a different manifestation of the same mistake. Naaman, a soldier in Aram, a neighboring country to Israel, has leprosy. He was told he could find a cure in Israel, so he takes an enormous amount of wealth and gifts and heads out to see the king to buy his healing.

Israel's king is distressed by the request—like, how do you think I can heal leprosy?! And, because the request seems impossible, the king fears a trap. This is a soldier from a neighboring land. Maybe he's trying to spark a conflict by asking for something that can't be given. The king tears his robes, which was a sign of grief and distress. The prophet Elisha hears about it, and basically shakes his head that the king of Israel didn't realize that the request would be a piece of cake for Israel's God. Without even looking up from his work, Elisha sends a messenger to tell Naaman to go wash himself seven times in the Jordan and he'll be fine.

Naaman was prepared to pay huge sums for his healing, but he is outraged at the message and won't even try the remedy. It was too simple. He was prepared to pay handsomely for what he wanted, which was a spectacle of Israel's God doing a halftime show where the prophet would descend from the ceiling amid flashing lights, and maybe call on angels and trumpets to heal him after Naaman performed some marvelous feat for the crowd.

That the prophet didn't even get up from his chair and just sent a lowly messenger to tell Naaman to wash in the river was insulting. Naaman believes in his own importance and wants Elisha to give of his own time to create a display from Israel's God to prove it. "Go take a bath Naaman," was not what he was paying for; and for the prophet not to deliver the message himself, well, he'd rather have the leprosy.

Naaman is confronted with one of the same temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness at the start of his ministry—Jump off the top of the temple and let the angels catch you! Let the whole world see that you are worth saving! Let everyone know that God will stop everything to meet the moment of your need. Jesus didn't fall for it; but that's what Naaman wanted. And he was furious that Elisha wouldn't give it to him.

It's Naaman's attendants, the ones who are used to being discounted in society, who point out Naaman's issue: "My father," they say to him, "if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" So Naaman, shamed by his own attendants, goes and washes in the Jordan, and he is healed. He still tries to make his grand payment to Elisha, but Elisha refuses the gift.

Lest we think that this is only a story meant to cast the people of Aram in a somewhat negative light, there turns out to be a grifter in Elisha's own circle. In the section after what Laura read, one of Elisha's servants, Gehazi, decides that Elisha was dumb to refuse Naaman's gift. Naaman had wealth to give away; his request was granted; and that shouldn't be free. And if Elisha didn't want it; Gehazi could certainly use it. So Gehazi secretly runs after Naaman to get at least something from him.

Gehazi catches up to the caravan, and lies to Naaman: “My master sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’” For the record a single talent of silver in Old Testament times was about 75 pounds worth. By Jesus’ day, the talent had been made into a coin, but in Elisha’s time the silver or gold was just weighed out.

Naaman gives him the clothing and twice the silver he asked for, so roughly 150 pounds of silver, and Gehazi thanks him and then takes it all for himself. When Gehazi gets back, Elisha asks where he has been. Gehazi puts on his shocked face. “Your servant didn’t go anywhere.”

Elisha, of course, knows everything that happened; first because he’s a prophet, but it was probably also hard to sneak back into the camp unnoticed while carrying 150 pounds of silver. “You’ve put on weight, Gehazi!”

Elisha asks him, “Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes—or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and his skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow.”

Both the story of Naaman and the story of Jacob’s ladder, show us the pitfalls of seeing some people, places, and things are more special in the eyes of God than others, with a side swipe at the greed and corrosive power of wealth. Remember that Abraham was fabulously wealthy. All that went to Isaac as an inheritance who grew it further. The largest share of Isaac’s wealth should have gone to Esau; but that birthright is one of the things Jacob stole from his twin in Genesis 27.

Jacob’s smaller portion would still have been plenty; but he wanted to be the preferred child—to be more important than his literal twin brother. It’s hard to be more equal than being twins; but Isaac preferred Esau and Rebekah preferred Jacob and it literally tore the family and their descendants apart, as we’ll see across the next two weeks. But Jacob’s dream is more specifically about place and Jacob’s immediate assumption that he had, without realizing it, stumbled onto a sacred spot. He’s not exactly a trustworthy character at this point, so I don’t feel bound to accept his interpretation.

Perhaps the places we view as sacred, or places where people experience the transcendent more reliably than others, have less to do with their location and more to do with the absence of distractions, allowing the holiness of God’s earth to be more easily seen, touched, and felt. Maybe the Gate of Heaven and the angels ascending and descending is what is happening everywhere, but in most places we’re too distracted to notice.

Maybe God doesn’t care whether you’re an important military officer or a paralyzed beggar and will spread healing love over both, using just the lapping waters of a shallow river or, in a New Testament case, the stirring waters of a common pool. Maybe God’s wealth is not to be used for securing special favors or to identify God’s favorite children. Maybe it’s meant to ensure that all have enough to live and thrive.

Maybe it’s not that one particular stone is sacred and can serve as a gateway to heaven if you sleep on it or try to extract a national blessing from it at the coronation of a monarch. It might be that all stones are sacred, because every inch of God’s creation—animal, vegetable, and mineral—is infused with the presence of its Creator.

Maybe spreading God’s blessing to all the families of the earth is most quickly and easily accomplished by becoming aware that all the families of the earth are priceless in God’s eyes; that none is any better or any worse than all the rest, and that angels are coming and going in every spot across the globe. Including here in this room at this minute and in each place where those watching online, either now or later, can be found. And, also, in every place where they are not. Maybe, in order to see it, we need to stop, clear the clutter, find a rock—any rock—and dream. Amen.