

Sermon: Checking One's Spiritual Compass

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19, Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

July 19, 2020

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Today's Old Testament reading comes from Genesis 28:10-19a, story of Jacob's ladder. As Scripture tells the story of Jacob's life, today's portion is one of the lowest points of his life. Let us keep our eyes on the faithfulness of God as we read the Word of God together.

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He 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. ¹²And 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; ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And 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."

¹⁸So 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. ^{19a}He called that place Bethel;

Amen

The second scripture reading comes from Psalm 139. Psalmist shares with us how our God's steadfast presence is with us in poetic words. Let us hear the Word of the Lord from Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24.

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, even as we look at the familiar story in the life of Jacob, we ask that these words would be a Living Words, opening the eyes of our hearts and our spiritual ears that we may hear the message you have prepared for us today. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer, amen.

I do not know about you, but lately, I feel like many of the decisions that I make are more difficult make compared to pre-COVID-19. There is a brief, yet serious decision that weighs in my mind, even for a simple task of ‘do I make a quick grocery run for gallon of milk on the way home?’ or ‘do I go visit my family to see my mother or my children’s great-grandmother?’ Many of us speak openly about looking forward to the day when the vaccine will end many of these difficult questions, to bring back the freedom to leave our own home without a worry to face the invisible agent of death, and to interact with others, especially with those whom we care about. It made me ponder in a similar vein, if we think about God’s saving grace that permanently defeats the sting of death and locks in our salvation? I cannot think of many passages in the Bible that is more suited to remind us of how we need to be very mindful of God’s love and grace as well as checking our spiritual compass.

Although many of us are familiar with the Jacob’s story, let us review what has taken place so far in his life. Jacob is a twin that was born to Isaac and Rebekah. Even before they were born, the twins struggled together in the womb. They fought so much that Rebekah asked the Lord, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?”¹ Well, Jacob must been a terrible loser, as he held on to the heel of his older twin, Esau, during birth. But Jacob won back his birthright years later by making one of the world’s greatest trade in history of humanity: bread and lentil stew for majority – if not all – of Isaac’s worldly possessions and more importantly, a promise God made to Abraham, which God recommits to Jacob in today’s passage

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^(d) in you and in your offspring.²

But that must not have been enough for Jacob. He also wanted Isaac’s personal spiritual blessing that usually was also meant for the eldest. So, with help from mom, Jacob deceives his father to gain both worldly and spiritual inheritance from his father. After finding out that everything has been stripped away from him, Esau declares his murderous intent and his goal of getting back all of which that are rightfully his. Rebekah heard how mad Esau

¹ Genesis 25:22

² Genesis 28:13-14

was, so she decides to send Jacob away to her brother and made an excuse for him, which brings us to today's passage.

Jacob is on the run for his life. Most likely he needed to sneak out without much preparation for the journey keep Esau in the dark. With limited resources, being truly on his own for the first time in his life, and with Esau, the huntsman, likely to be tracking his footsteps, every step Jacob took as well as every decision he made became possible life-or-death choices. Everything that Jacob had worked for and everything that he has gained suddenly disappeared from his sight. Things were not supposed to be this way. This is not what he had dreamed. As he took a rock as a pillow to rest his tired body, he is stuck between the rock and the hard place, both literally and figuratively: he cannot go into town of Luz because of not knowing how its people will treat him and possibility to leading Esau to know where he is heading while choosing to stay means having no protection from the elements and wild beast. He cannot go back home to declare what is his and fight a losing battle against Esau, but the journey to the uncle Leban's place is too far with such a limited resource. Odds were stacked against him. To address the need of now, the fatigue body after non-stop traveling, he decides to take baby steps and drifts to sleep.

Jacob's story of making difficult decisions is not a stranger for many of us, especially during the era of COVID-19. As life becomes harder, when the worldly journey seems to be more isolated and alone, we need to check and maintain our spiritual compass. Even when we feel like we are not on a spiritual pilgrimage, God reminds us as God told Jacob – “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”³ God showed God's grace and love for Jacob when darkness have covered him and the light around him becomes night, God who stands at the top of the stairway of heaven was there next to him.⁴ God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also our God whom we serve. Like Jacob, we too have our spiritual inheritance – blessing and a charge – to be a source of blessing for ‘all the families of the earth.’⁵ We are called to be the witnesses and messenger of the Good News. We are the ones who are supposed to be ascending and descending the ladder to the heaven's gate. In John 1:51, Jesus tells Nathanael that ‘[people] will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’ Ascending and descending **on** the Son of man, which means the ladder to the heaven's gate is Jesus himself. We carry out the spiritual work of God by making our worldly journey on the promises of God and following the way, the truth, and the life in Christ Jesus.

³ Genesis 28:15

⁴ Psalm 139:11

⁵ Genesis 28:14

So are we checking our spiritual compass? Are we aware of where God is and what God is doing? Is it pointing towards somewhere or something or is it pointing toward you and your heart? Because God is much closer than you think. Amen.