

## *Living without Fear*

Genesis 28.10-17

John 6.16-21

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“How awesome is this place!  
This is none other than the house of God,  
and this is the gate of heaven.”

- Jacob, son of Isaac

### *Readings*

Genesis 28.10-17:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.’ <sup>16</sup>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’ <sup>17</sup>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.’

John 6.16-21:

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, <sup>17</sup>got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. <sup>18</sup>The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. <sup>19</sup>When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. <sup>20</sup>But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ <sup>21</sup>Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

### *Fond Memories and Lingering Regrets*

The story of Jacob’s dream takes me back to my childhood, and the rousing song of faith we sang in Bible School called Jacob’s Ladder. Do you remember it? (All sing) “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder; we are climbing Jacob’s ladder; we are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross.”

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I guess I'm not the only one who went to Bible School! Good job. I have fond memories of this song and of many wonderful days in Bible School. My only regret is the meaning of the song I was taught as a child. Our teachers used it as a tool to keep us in line and make sure we were good boys and girls. Climbing Jacob's ladder, we were told, is all about staying in line, following the rules, doing as we were told. Do this, and every rung would lead higher and higher. Little did we dream that the story recounts one of the most profound spiritual experiences possible, or that the experience was available not only to Jacob, but to us as well. Little did we know that the story recounts a tale of living daily in God's presence, of walking daily with God; not a vindictive God looking over our shoulders to jump on missteps and mistakes, mind you, but a loving God yearning to offer healing and wholeness, meaning, peace, and joy all along the way!

It should come as no surprise that I am excited to preach on this story today; this story, and the similar story from John 6 in which the disciples of Jesus encounter him walking on the water toward their storm-tossed boat. In his dream, you will recall, Jacob saw a ladder stretching clear to heaven with angels ascending and descending. He saw, that is to say, a sacred center, a thin place as the ancient Celts would say, a seam in space and time at which communion with God was possible. In the gospel story, Jesus identifies himself with God; it is I, he said, I AM, he said, and at this point they found themselves frightened, awed, and wonder filled, because they too found themselves at a sacred center, a thin place at which communion with God was not only possible, but inevitable. This is exciting stuff! And after we pray, I would like to explore the significance of these stories for our lives. Please pray with me.

Gracious One, open our hearts to the vision of life and love, of mystery beyond mystery, love beyond love, present and available in our lives, moment by moment, day by day. Open our hearts to this vision and our lives to the courage, the hope, and the strength it affords that we may live our lives without fear. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

### *The God They Saw*

These stories seem ill suited for a sermon entitled Living without Fear. At first glance, in fact, neither seems to have anything to say about living without fear. Did you notice that? They both seem to be all about fear. Immediately following Jacob's dream and the vision of God that accompanied it, he was frightened; and gripped by that fear exclaimed, "How

awesome is this place.” The question for us is this; how could courage follow from such an experience? The same is true of the disciples’ experience with Jesus. The awesome nature of Jesus’ appearance is underscored by the fact that the disciples were unfazed by the fearful storm that had suddenly engulfed them; but at the sight of Jesus walking toward them, the NRSV says “They were terrified.” Again, how could such an experience lead beyond fear to courage? Both stories are all about fear, and seem ill suited to speak to courage and strength.

Perhaps a modern parallel might help. You remember, I am sure, the life and work of Robert Oppenheimer. He is called the father of the atomic bomb because of his work on its development. At the site of the bomb’s first test, viewing the destructive potential of nuclear power for the first time, Oppenheimer was overwhelmed by fear. His mind raced, in fact, to a quotation from the Bhagavadgita that seemed to sum up the dreadful nature of the experience. I am now become death. I am the destroyer of worlds.

If the experience of Jacob was anything like this; and if the experience of the disciples was anything like this; then their stories have nothing to teach us about living life without fear. But these experiences are not parallel, because the fear experienced by Jacob and the disciples was no ordinary, everyday, run of the mill fear. It was not simply dread of potential destruction; it was not a consuming fear of bad things to come, of dark days ahead. Rather, they found themselves in the presence of the power beyond all powers, the mystery beyond all mysteries. They found themselves eclipsed by this reality, the reality of God, and they saw themselves for what they were; twigs standing against the wind, skiffs adrift in a surging ocean.

They were fearful, of course, recognizing that they could so easily be eclipsed or consumed by this reality, this boundless power. Nevertheless, the fear they experienced quickly changed to awe and wonder, because it was not God the destroyer of worlds they saw, it was not God as doom and death they saw. When they found themselves in God’s presence, they recognized a loving heart that yearned to continue creating in and through them, a powerful, loving heart that yearned to make them whole. Yes, the power of God is beyond any power we can imagine, but its power is creative, not destructive. Thus, the parallel with Oppenheimer’s experience breaks down. Beyond the experience of fear, they found

themselves encouraged, emboldened, and strengthened by the recognition that the God they encountered was a God of powerful, powerful love.

Of course, the disciples had fears to contend with later on. We could talk till the cows come home about the many difficulties they encountered growing into their roles as apostles, teachers, and pillars of the faith. They had their fears, fears that if harbored long would tie them down, keep them bound and in chaos. Yet when they saw God in the face of Jesus, the great I AM in the man Jesus, they were moved beyond fear. They were moved to courage, joy, and compassion. When they surrendered to this One, they found themselves inspired to live their lives not only for themselves, but for others as well. They were moved beyond fear because their eyes had been opened to the mystery beyond mysteries. They found themselves in God's presence and were transported beyond fear altogether into a realm of courage, light, and life.

### *Ladders, Ladders Everywhere*

This is all well and good for Jacob. This is all well and good for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They were giants of faith, living on a higher plain than you and I; they were chosen because of their ability to stand in God's presence. In short, friends, we too can have such an experience. You don't have to be a biblical giant living in enchanted times and places. In fact, you don't have to be anywhere in particular. Did you notice that Jacob's experience began when he arrived at a "certain place"? Well, that certain place was in the middle of nowhere, it was quite simply where he found himself when the sun sank below the horizon and it was time to stop for the night. In this "certain place" that could be anywhere, lying on a makeshift bed of dry earth with a rock for a pillow; Jacob, a man with a checkered past and few prospects for the future, found himself at the connecting point of heaven and earth, he found himself embraced by the presence and reality of God.

This means, as Barbara Brown Taylor is fond of pointing out, that God can drop a ladder anywhere. That is to say, at any time or place, under any circumstances, anyone with eyes to see can find her or himself in God's presence. Whatever you happen to be engaged in - work, family life, recreation - whatever state of mind you're in - confused, fearful, clearheaded, or

chaotic - God will drop a ladder and be present to you. You too can be transported beyond your fears when you realize that the power beyond all powers, the mystery beyond all mysteries is not only with, but for you, yearning to grace your life with healing and wholeness. When God is for you in such a real and powerful way, what place is there for fear? What can we not face when God is for us?

The only question we have to answer today is this; will we allow ourselves the experience of a Jacob? Will we allow ourselves the experience of a Peter, Andrew, James or John? Will we recognize that God can drop a ladder anywhere and be present to help us deal with our fears? How many times in your life have your plans been foiled by fear: fear of failure, fear of being exposed as unworthy or ill prepared, sometimes even fear of success? How much of a role does fear play in your life, prohibiting you from stepping out, from venturing passionately into life? We all have fears, but those fears can be transformed into awe and wonder if we recognize that God is for us, with us, and yearning to infuse our lives with courage and joy.

Take a moment, if you would, close your eyes and reflect on your worst fears. When you have them clearly in view, remember this; whatever fears you face in life, God is for you and yearns to help you work through and live beyond those fears. It is my prayer that this will be your experience today. Amen.