

Real Vision and the Persevering God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning, I'm Terry Kochi. I'm a member of Oikosin the Oaks and Women Reading Women.

A reading from the book of Genesis as printed in your liturgy. Genesis 28, 1 through 5 and 10 through 22.

So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him, Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram to the house of your mother's father Bethuel.

Take a wife for yourself there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples.

[1 : 11] May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.

Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were 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.

[2 : 30] 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.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. 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. Early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God, and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house.

And of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God. All right.

[3 : 49] The pressure's on to preach not a long sermon, so here we go. I think of all the characters in the Bible, most modern people can relate pretty well to Jacob because he has so many problems.

He's got some significant relational failures, spiritual struggles, character flaws. He's really kind of made a mess of his life.

And if you were here last week, you'll remember that basically he conspired with his mother. He deceived his old and blind father. He stole the blessing from his brother who's now angry enough

with him to want to murder him.

And basically we saw that Jacob is a scoundrel. You know, he's a liar. He's a cheater. He's a blasphemer. And he basically says his final goodbye to his parents.

He's never going to see them again. And he's about 20 years old, right? He's this troubled 20-year-old setting off in search of his place in life, running away from his past sins, hoping he can have a fresh start.

[5 : 05] And that's where this story picks up. In Genesis 28 today, it says in verse 11 that when he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set.

And taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. And that's strange because the custom of the ancient Near East is that you would find safe lodging in the home of a neighbor.

And this tells us that Jacob is so alienated, he's so alone, that he's forced to sleep under the stars. The comfort of his parents' home has been replaced by these stones.

It's not just one stone that's like a pillow. I think it's many stones that he's basically kind of gathered around his head like a little fortress to keep him safe. And the security of the sun is replaced by the dangers of nighttime.

So what we sense is that he's exposed, right? He's vulnerable. And I'm imagining quite depressed as he thinks about the comfort and the security that he's left behind.

[6 : 13] Certainly, if I were him, I would be quite frightened as I think about the long and perilous and uncertain journey that lies ahead of me in the wilderness with no money and no friends.

And what in the world is he probably thinking at this moment? He's thinking to himself, are the promises that my dad gave me really mine? You know, this blessing that I stole from my brother, am I going to be blessed like Abraham was blessed and Isaac was blessed?

And if I'm truly to be the heir and the inheritor of the promised land and a promised people, then why am I a single guy running away from the promised land? He's in the dark.

He's all alone. He's on the run. Full of fear. No confidence whatsoever. And maybe you can relate to that today.

So Jacob, like many of us, we know what it's like to just have to force yourself to sleep at night when we can't sleep. And so he forces himself to sleep with absolutely no expectation of what is going to happen that night.

[7 : 32] And make sure you notice that Jacob's not seeking God. He's not at all praying to God. He's not asking God for mercy or for protection or for help or for guidance.

He just goes to sleep. And what we see here is that God's grace initiates toward Jacob. God's grace intervenes in Jacob's life.

That this God of heaven loves us too much to leave us to ourselves and in our sins. Right? He wants us and he wants a relationship with us so much that he goes out for us in the dark.

He searches for us until he finds us. And the fact that God works with Jacob who's so unworthy and so undeserving with all of his conflicting desires and drives and struggles and failures, the complete mess he's made of his life, that's a sign of great hope that God actually works with people like me and people like you.

Of course, the Lord has to come to Jacob in a dream at night because during the day, Jacob's defenses are up so high, God can't even break through. But he waits until he's asleep at night and he comes and what we're going to see is that he turns this deeply flawed man into one who's highly favored.

[8 : 54] Right? This man who's terribly broken into someone who's wonderfully blessed. And what I want to look at is the three kind of movements of the story. The Lord of the stairway, the awesome presence of God, and the grateful response to grace.

The Lord of the stairway, the awesome presence of God, and the grateful response to grace. If you look at verse 12, you'll see the Lord of the stairway. And it says, he had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven.

And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it, and there above it stood the Lord.

Now, he sees three things in this dream. First of all, he sees this giant stairway.

And this is different than Led Zeppelin's stairway to heaven. Because in Hebrew, it says the stairway is resting on or it's placed to the earth.

And why does that matter? Because it's about directional emphasis. This is not a stairway to heaven.

[9 : 58] Right? It's not a stairway that's built by human beings so that they can go from earth up to heaven. Like we saw Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel. This is a, this is created not by humans, it's created by God.

And the purpose of the stairway is that so he can come from heaven down to earth. Right? The initiative is God's initiative. The connection and the communication is due to the grace of God. Only he can bring heaven to earth. And what else does Jacob see in this dream? And the second thing he sees in this dream is that angels are ascending and descending on the stairway. And you've got to completely rid your mind of whatever image you have of angels. Right? From Hallmark cards and TV shows. Angels are not chubby, naked babies with wings. They are not soft, slim, comforting creatures that make you feel good. In fact, every time you read in the Bible, what do the angels say to human beings? They say, fear not.

[11 : 02] Why? Because they make you afraid. These are ancient spiritual beings that dwell in the presence of the living God. And they're these messengers of God, these warriors of God who are coming to bear the light of God and the holiness of God and the power of God.

And what it says is these royal messengers who represent the sovereign king of heaven himself, they're going up and down and back and forth and in and out from the throne room of God in order to carry and to execute the decrees of the king in his world.

And so anytime angels are showing up, big stuff's happening. Right? God's kingdom is on the move. And so Jacob sees a stairway. He sees angels going up and down on that stairway. And what else does he see? The third thing he sees in verse 13, it says, there above it or there above him stood the Lord, stood Yahweh himself. Now if you're Jacob and you're a liar, you're a deceiver.

Right? You've stolen your brother's blessing and God is right here. Yahweh is right here standing over you. What are you thinking? You're thinking, uh-oh. This can't be good.

[12 : 24] This is not a happy dream. This is a nightmare. This is a vision of judgment. What in the world is the Lord about to do to me? Here is Yahweh in all of his majestic authority and he's standing over you.

Right? The same Lord who in Genesis 18 verse 19 said, Abraham, you are to direct your children and your household to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and what is just.

Has Jacob done what is right and what is just? Has Jacob done what is right and what is just? We said that the definition of wickedness is to disadvantage your community in order to advantage yourself.

And Jacob has been anything but righteous and anything but just. And he deserves to be punished by God. But is that what happens here in this story?

Yahweh is standing over Jacob not to review his shameful past, not to condemn him, not to give him the just judgment that he absolutely deserves.

[13 : 34] No, he says, I'm here. Yahweh says, I'm here as a God of grace to present to you, Jacob, an alternative future of a life centered on me.

Now, if you're a mom or a dad, you know what it's like to go in in the dark late at night and to go into your, over to your sleeping and dreaming child and to stand over them and to maybe put your hand on their head, maybe kiss them on the cheek, maybe rub their back in a posture of nearness, a posture of intimacy, a posture of tenderness.

And here is the Lord standing over Jacob and he whispers three things into the ear of his sleeping and dreaming child. And what does he say? He says exactly what Jacob needs to hear in verse 13. The Lord stood above him and 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. And all the peoples on earth we bless through you and through your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land.

[14 : 55] I will not leave you until I have done what I promised. Jacob sees three things and he hears three things. The first thing is that remember that Jacob's penniless.

Jacob has a stolen blessing and that's about all he's got. He's running away from the promised land. He's got no inheritance. His future is as dark as the night sky. And what does he hear? He hears this. I am Yahweh. The God who made promises. The God who kept covenant. The God who gave the blessing of life to Abraham and to Isaac. And I'm going to bless you too. Jacob, you don't even have a wife right now. But I'm going to give you abundant descendants and I'm going to bring you and your children back to this good land that's flowing with milk and honey. And through your fruitful and multiplying descendants, my salvation, my supernatural life is going to be on you. And through you, it's going to go out to all the peoples of the earth. [16:00] Because they're blessed to be a blessing. If we can pull up this slide. I think we have a slide. Maybe, maybe not. It's the slide I show every week in the sermon series.

Where basically, the Lord is reiterating the promises that he's made to Abraham in Genesis 12. To give him a people. To give him a place. To give him this international blessing. That's the first thing Jacob hears. The second thing is that Jacob is family-less. Jacob is friendless. He's totally alone. Right? He's never going to see his parents again. His brother wants to murder him. He's a total mess of a single guy looking for a wife. And what does he hear? The Lord says to him, I will be with you. You have my faithful presence. [17:02] And the Lord is saying to Jacob, on this journey, even when you feel alone, you're never alone.

Because I, the Lord of heaven and earth, am with you. And if you have me, if you have my presence, you lack nothing that you really need. And the third thing that Jacob hears, Jacob's not only penniless, he's not only friendless, but he's also defenseless. He's running for his life into uncertainty. He's out here in this howling wilderness. He's completely vulnerable. So vulnerable. He's just pulling stones around his head to give him a sense of protection and safety. And what does he hear? The Lord says, I will watch over you wherever you go. No. It's the same thing God said to Abraham in Genesis 15. I am your shield. I will be your shield. I'm going to watch over you. [18:10] I'm going to sovereignly protect you so that no matter what unexpected turns your life is bound to take, every time I'm going to actively intervene for your welfare.

I'm going to be standing with you in all those places of threat and danger to defend you. And whoever deals lightly with you, whoever dismisses or disparages you, whoever holds you in contempt, whoever tries to harm you, I'm going to be right there with you to protect you and defend you. I'll watch over you. He sees three things, the stairway, the angels, and the Lord himself. And he hears three things, this promise of a people and a place, this promise of the presence, this promise of protection. And none of these things Jacob hears from God are things that he gets through his own human manipulation and human deception like we were talking about last week. These are all just surprising gifts of the grace of God to a person who's completely unworthy and totally undeserving, who's not even seeking God, not even expecting to get anything from God. [19:33] And God comes to him and he doesn't blast him away with condemnation. He blesses him with unconditional love. How does that apply to us?

Well, if you're like Jacob and you're here today and you've done the worst possible things, your life is falling apart, you're in the dark, you've hit the bottom, you're on the run, you're not even calling out to God, you don't even care about your sins, the Lord of the stairway, this king whose kingdom is on the move, he stands over you like a parent with a sleeping child. And he's not at the top of the stairway. He's not saying, come up here so I can talk to you about your shameful past. No, he's taken the initiative. He's come down to you unsought and unasked for to offer you an alternative future of mercy and grace. Mercy is not getting what your sins deserve. And grace is getting the forgiveness and the blessing that you don't deserve. God says to Jacob, nothing is going to stop me from blessing you. And so you don't need to be afraid. You can be totally confident.

[21 : 04] And friends, I hope we realize that the Lord of the stairway, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is offering the same thing to us as well. So that's the Lord of the stairway.

I want to talk now about the awesome presence of God. Because you notice in verse 16, it says, when Jacob awoke from his dream, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.

And he was afraid. And he said, how awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. To this point in the book of Genesis, there's been nowhere near this level of amazement.

And Jacob, it says he's overwhelmed with a sense of both fear and awe. There's a book written in 1917 by a guy named Rudolph Otto.

And he wrote a book called The Idea of the Holy. He's trying to help modern post-Enlightenment people come to terms with the idea of the holy.

[22 : 14] And what he says is, he says, when we experience the power of natural phenomenon, like if you're out at a volcano and it begins to erupt, or if you go into the path of totality for a total solar eclipse, you are going to experience what Otto calls a numinous mystery.

mystery. And it's a mystery that's tremendous and terrifying at the same time. And you will feel overcome with a sense of awe.

Right? I watched some videos this week of the 2024 total solar eclipse. And in those videos, when the moon moves over the sun and the light of the sun is blotted out in the middle of the day, people begin weeping.

And they begin crying out, saying, oh my, oh my, this is the most awesome, incredible thing I've ever seen. And they're undone. They can't help but cry out because they're experiencing something objective.

They're experiencing something outside of themselves. They're experiencing something large, something cosmic, something powerful, something beyond their control. And it overwhelms them with a sense of awe.

[23 : 38] And this is, I think, part of the reason why we spend our time and our money going to the mountains and going to the oceans and going to big forests with giant trees. It's why we go seeking the sunrise, the sunset, because our hearts long to be next to something that's bigger and more beautiful than the self.

Right? We love to sit or stand next to something and say, you know, I am small and that is big. And I am weak but that is powerful. And I am so flawed but that is good and that is beautiful.

And this happens many, many times throughout the Bible. The prophet Isaiah it says that he sees a vision of the Lord who's the king and he's enthroned on high and he's exalted and he hears the angels calling out in the presence of the Lord, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And in that moment the prophet encounters this tremendous and terrifying numinous mystery and he says, woe to me for I'm ruined for I am unclean and I live among a people who are unclean.

In the Gospels it happens in the New Testament where in the Gospel of Luke chapter 5 Peter has this encounter with Christ. He experiences the power and the authority of Jesus and it says that Peter fell at his feet and he said to Jesus he said, go away from me Lord because I'm a sinful man.

[25 : 21] That's exactly what is happening to Jacob right now. He's shaken and he's afraid and he's amazed because he's aware that he's in the presence of the absolute and transcendent Lord and he says, how awesome is this place?

And you see what's happening to Jacob is here he is in this middle of nowhere place that feels to him it's dark and it's stony and it's hard but his eyes are opened to something beyond his physical circumstances his eyes are opened to the metaphysical and all of a sudden this dark place becomes filled with light and this stony place becomes a sanctuary and this hard place becomes awesome and wonderful.

How does that happen? Because Jacob has a vision of the presence of the Lord and he hears the voice of the living God and he encounters the truth of God's powerful promises and when that happens he doesn't feel this kind of casual flippant attitude no he's overcome with a sense of reverent fear aware he says of how ignorant he was of how small and how weak and how unworthy and how sinful he is and aware at the same time of how great and how powerful and how wise and how holy the Lord is and I think this is important because some of us feel like we're in a dark place

we're in a stony place and we're in a hard place we're out in the middle of nowhere and I want you to be encouraged that that's the place where God likes to work it's the place that God likes to turn into Beth

El the house of God the gate of heaven it's the place that he likes to turn in to an awesome place and it's not so much that Jacob's dream takes him out of the real world in some sort of escapist fantasy but what happens is that he has this dream and it reveals to him the real world of God the real world of heaven and it becomes so much more convincing to him than this little world of fear and guilt and shame and so he goes from that world and he begins to live in this world in a completely different way you tracking with me this is why on Sundays we gather together around the bonfire the preached word and sacraments and it's why in our midweek community groups we gather around the campfire of the shared word and prayer with each other and it's why in our daily time with God we gather around the candlelight of meditated

God's meditated word because these are the means by which God reveals to us the real world of heaven these are the means by which we come face to face with the awesome reality of the presence of the living God and this is how God opens our eyes it's how God transforms our hearts and our lives to be the very house of God where the presence of God is dwelling it's how he transforms this ordinary gathering of human beings into the very gate of heaven the awesome presence of God the God who is with us changes absolutely everything when it comes into our lives and this is why Jesus was at such pains to help people experience it and to understand it if you if you go home later today you can look this up but in the gospel of John chapter 1 opening chapter of the gospel of John we see this encounter between

[29 : 32] Jesus and a guy named Nathaniel and Philip another guy he comes to Nathaniel and he says hey Nathaniel we found the Messiah his name is Jesus and he's from Nazareth and Nathaniel says Nazareth can anything good come from Nazareth God does not come down in places like Nazareth and Philip says well come and see and when Jesus saw Nathaniel he said here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit here's an honest man and Nathaniel hears Jesus say this about him and he says how do you know me how do you know who I am and Jesus says to him Nathaniel I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you and what's crazy is we have no idea what Nathaniel was doing under that fig tree right we don't know if he was was he praying was he meditating on scripture was he reading

Genesis 28 we have no we have no clue but the moment that Jesus meets him and knows who he is and not only who he is but what he's doing for Nathaniel it just blows all of his questions all of his doubts all of his skepticism completely away and he says to Jesus he says Rabbi you are the son of God you are the king of Israel and Jesus says Nathaniel you're going to see greater things than that he says very truly I tell you you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man what in the world why is Jesus having a bible study about Genesis 28 with Nathaniel because what Jesus wants to say is that I'm the Lord of the stairway I am God come to you in the flesh speaking with you right now right here

I'm the link between heaven and earth right you want to know where the house of God is where the awesome presence of God is he's right here looking at you he knows you you want to know what the access point is between God the father and human beings it's me Jesus says see the gospel is not about us going up the stairway to God right the gospel is about God the son coming down the stairway to us and the gospel works in the complete opposite direction of how all the other major world religions work because this is a stairway not to heaven it's a stairway from heaven it's a stairway of grace it's not that any of us have to go climb the steps up to God we don't have to do the ten commandments of

Judaism we don't have to do the five pillars of Islam we don't have to do the eightfold path of Buddhism we don't have to do all the steps and all the requirements of whatever that religion says would make you acceptable to God no Jesus says the angels of God are ascending and descending not even to the son of man but on the son of man there's not a series of steps for you to take Jesus says I am the steps in fact I've fulfilled all the steps I've fulfilled all the requirements I've lived the life that you were meant to live the life of love and I died the death I took the penalty that you were meant to take I've done all the steps everything that was needed I've done absolutely everything for you I've not come to show you the stairway to God or the steps to God I've come to be the stairway and to do the steps for you Jesus says if you want to understand me if you want to know what it's like for heaven to be opened before you then you got to see heaven and earth

intersecting and overlapping over me over my crucified yet resurrected body if you want to see the royal majestic power of the kingdom of God moving up and down it's moving up and down over me you see

Jacob is lonely Jacob's isolated Jacob is an alienated guy because of all of his pride because of his lies because of his malice and that's what sin does it separates us from people it separates us from God and what Jesus is doing is he's saying look I've come to substitute myself in Jacob's place I've come to get up on that place of cosmic alienation cosmic separation and ultimate loneliness on the cross so that someone like Jacob who is not seeking God doesn't expect anything from God doesn't even want God can have any hope in this world and Jesus is saying look if you want to experience the awesome presence of God you've got to come to me if you want to see what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each other you've got to come follow me very truly

[35 : 20] I tell you you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man all right last thing because we got a congregational meeting the stairway the Lord of the stairway the awesome presence of God and finally the grateful response to grace this story amazes me because it's about a man running away from home who runs into God and it's about a man who's afraid of his brother who then becomes afraid of God and it's about this nowhere place that!

somehow becomes nothing less than the place of God and how does Jacob respond to that well in verse 21 for the first time in Jacob's life he says the Lord is my God right God he says the Lord is my God he has a personal relationship that's real and dynamic and intimate with God and he shows that not just in what he believes and what he values he shows that in how he lives and how does Jacob then live well it says in verse 18 early the next morning Jacob took the stone he placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it and he called that place Bethel though the city used to be called Luz then Jacob made a vow saying if God or I think it's better since God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey faith for

Jacob is so much more than inner spiritual feelings faith is expressed in tangible embodied liturgical acts it says he's pouring oil to venerate this nowhere place as a holy place he's doing his morning prayers he's talking seriously with God he's making the Lord my God pledging exclusive allegiance to God promising to God that he's going to worship him in the future no matter what and here's this guy who's totally empty handed and he begins offering sacrifices to God and promising to give something to God in verse 22 he says of all that you give me I will give you 10% because I want to say thank you for your presence and your protection and your provision and your preservation now the good good news for us is that after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit his apostles dropped this principle of tithing and we all say yes but the bad news is that the apostles adopted a higher spiritual principle that goes like this whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will reap generously and what they mean by that the apostles mean we don't want to lest you not give all that

God wants you to give the way that we know God's grace is operative in Jacob's life is because he's responding to that grace with gratitude and he's putting his faith to work through his praying and through his giving and also through the way he's talking about himself in his own story he begins to re-narrate his life with a new plot line in verse 20 he's talking about his journey and he says God will be with me he'll watch over me on this journey he'll bring me back in safety or he'll bring me back that word is shalom to my father's house in shalom after he experienced the presence of God and the supreme display of God's grace in his life Jacob no longer sees himself as an exile or a fugitive who's running away from something no now he sees himself as a pilgrim who's on a journey with God who's running towards something and that's what happens when God comes into your life the way you narrate your life is completely transformed you say I'm no longer a solitary guy I'm no longer a solitary gal who's just wandering by myself on this random secular!

[40 : 05] touring expedition to see as much as I can see before I die no you say I'm a person who's on a sacred pilgrimage with God and I'm making my way to the city of God I'm making my way to the shalom of God and therefore from now on I consecrate myself I commit myself to my trustworthy God who I know is leading me on this holy journey to test me and to refine my character to remold me and transform my personality because ultimately I know that I'm going to arrive in safety I'm going to arrive in shalom at that place where God has destined me to be that's what a grateful response to grace looks like so let's think about that as we come to this table in the name of the

Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen