

**Third Sunday of Easter/Stewardship #1**  
**April 14, 2002**  
**"God's Mercy Enables Us to See"**  
**Genesis 28:10-22**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**Genesis 28:10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 11 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. 12 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. 13 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. 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." 16 When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." 18 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. 19 He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. 20 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 21 so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God 22 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."**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jacob and Esau, were twin brothers, but they were hardly identical. They were different in appearance and different in personality. Their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, didn't even try to disguise the fact that they each had their favorite son. Their mother, Rebekah, always liked Jacob better. Jacob was a homebody who cultivated a close relationship with his mother by staying close to the family tents. Isaac, on the other hand, was partial to Esau. Esau was an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter, a man's man. Eventually their sibling rivalry erupted in a family-sundering fight. Jacob, pushed by Rebekah, disguised himself as his brother and tricked his blind father into giving him the blessing that Isaac intended to give Esau. Esau was so enraged that he threatened to kill his brother. So Jacob couldn't stay at home anymore. He set out for Haran, where his mother's family

lived, more than 600 miles away.

That's where we catch up with Jacob in Genesis 28. He's repentant, but he's tasting the bitter fruit of his lies. He's three or four day's journey out from Beersheba, a refugee from his own home. He has no idea what lies ahead of him. He's more than 40 years old, but he's not been this way before. But God's mercy is going to break through Jacob's fear and sorrow in dramatic fashion. God's mercy is going to enable him to see—to see 1] God's undeserved love for him, and 2] to see his response to God's love. God's mercy is still doing that for us today.

### **1. To see his undeserved love for us**

It says here, *“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.”* Jacob is the picture of loneliness. We're not told that anyone was traveling with him. When he stops for the night, it's not at an inn where there'd be a host and other travelers. He simply beds down for the night in the open country, taking a rock as a headrest. Jacob has plenty of time and plenty of solitude to think about his situation.

But when he sleep, he dreams: *“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.”* This stairway-to-heaven dream is comforting all by itself. Jacob had been worrying that he had sinned himself right out from under God's providence. He'd very likely been wondering whether his exile from his family also meant exile from God. But here was God at the top of this ladder. And God's invisible agents, the angels, were visible. They were descending the stairway to minister to Jacob and going back up to report to the LORD. Jacob was finding in this dream that he hadn't outrun the boundaries of God's providence and protection after all. He was seeing God's mercy in this dream. This dream was the Father's warm embrace of prodigal Jacob. If it wasn't quite, “Come home, all is forgiven,” it was at least, “Don't fear to go on because all is forgiven.”

And there's a soundtrack to this dream. God identifies himself by his covenant name, the LORD, that is, the God of free and faithful grace. This is his father's God and his grandfather's God. And when the great I AM speaks, it's not an angry denunciation of Jacob, but a series of merciful promises—four of them. 1] A PLACE. *“I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.”* 2] A PEOPLE. *“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.”* 3] A PROMISE of a Savior. *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.”* And 4] PROTECTION. *“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.”*

This was simply amazing. What a turnaround! Jacob's loneliness and fear had been laid to rest. The LORD had vowed to be with him for the duration. This land that he was treading so tentatively was going to be his land. He had hit 40 and

had no wife yet, not to mention children, but God was going to give him more descendants than there was dust in Canaan. And, best of all, there was hope for Jacob and every other sinner who's ever been the victim of his own worst impulses: a Savior, an offspring through whom the whole world would be blessed. Jacob must have been thinking now what he'd say out loud many years later: **"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant."** (Gen. 32:10) God's mercy was enabling Jacob to see God's undeserved love. The callow youth persona that thought lying and scheming were valid means of advancing his interests was receding. In its place was a humble believer who was staggered by God's grace.

Jacob's story is really the story of every believer. By rights we all ought to be worried that we've worn out our welcome with God. Every one of us ought to be exiled from Christ's kingdom. And we know ourselves better than to ask, "Why?" Like Mary Irons says in one of our hymns: ***How well you know my griefs and fears, Your grace abused, my misspent years.*** But she goes on to say, ***So now to you with contrite tears, Christ crucified, I come.*** No one who comes in faith to Christ crucified is sent away in shame. In the blood he shed at the cross we are washed till not a stain remains. At the cross there's healing for souls distressed. We find in Christ our life, our rest. Rather than abandoning us, he pledges to be with us always, to the very end of the age. He's promised us a place, the heavenly land. Even now we're numbered among his people, included in the ranks of the great multitude that will gather before his throne in heaven. And the Savior God sent may be the descendant of Jacob, but he's our Savior, too. God has granted us a revelation, too. By his mercy we see his grace-and we're staggered by it, too.

When Jacob woke up, the memory of this dream stayed with him. In holy fear and wonder he said, *"Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."* The same can be said of every place where God reveals his nature as a gracious and forgiving God. This is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven because God meets you here with his promises and shows you his grace here. We, too, have come to Beth-el, the house of God.

In the closing verses of this chapter, Jacob sees something else. He sees a potential response on his part to God's grace.

## **2. To see our response to God's grace**

After the dream revealing God's undeserved love came a vow from Jacob. That's the way it is with those who've seen God's grace. They don't just sit there cold and unresponsive. God's grace melts their ingratitude and they take action. In our Gospel today Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' love. He pledged to give half his possessions to the poor and pay back fourfold anyone he'd cheated while he was collecting taxes. Here God's promises to Jacob inspired Jacob to make a promise to God.

Jacob said, *“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 house, 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”* There’s a way of looking at Jacob’s vow that sees it as a striking a bargain with God, a contract complete with “if” clauses: If God will be with me, and if he will give me food and clothing, and if he will return me to my father’s house, then... The trouble with that way of looking at this vow is that it isn’t very charitable toward Jacob. He’s not scheming again, trying to put God in a position where he’s contractually obligated to him. He’s simply repeating God’s promises and pledging his loyalty in return. “The LORD is my God.” “This place, Bethel, is his house.” And, “Of everything I get, God gets a tenth.”

I don’t know the mechanics of how Jacob gave God that tenth. I’m pretty sure he didn’t put it into the offering plate at his church. I rather doubt that he wrote out a check and sent it directly to the synod. But one way or another, he regularly gave an amount in proportion to his income to the Lord. What I do know is that Jacob had a steward’s heart. His vow was made freely and his tithe was given freely. There was no Law of Moses yet to legislate the giving of a tithe. God didn’t hand Jacob a bill for promises spoken. Jacob heard the promises and believed them and responded from the heart. And by promising a tenth, a percentage of his income, he didn’t set either a lower or an upper limit on what he’d give to God. I’m sure he didn’t have much then. One tenth of what was in his knapsack was not much. But under God’s blessing Jacob would grow to be a wealthy man and as far as we know, he kept his vow.

The purpose of a stewardship program like the one we’re beginning this Sunday is to help us see how we can respond to God’s grace. One vital response is confession, like Jacob’s: You, LORD, are my God. That’s our creed: the creed that lives in our hearts and becomes audible as we speak our Savior’s name in faith. And we say, too, LORD, this is your house. This is where my Savior Jesus is present through his Word and his sacraments. And, yes, like Jacob, we also respond by saying, “LORD, of all that you give me I will give you a portion.” I said “portion.” Jacob said “tenth.” There are good reasons why we’re slow to use the word “tenth” or “tithe.” There’s no requirement here. The New Testament knows no “do-it-or-else” motivations and Christians insofar as they are Christians need none of that kind of motivation. But the tithe as a goal, Jacob’s giving of a tenth as an example of free and generous giving, there’s nothing wrong with that. The more we know of God’s grace, the greater the impulse to generosity. We can’t out-give God. We can only respond in imitation of his generosity.

It all begins with God’s love for us. With our eyes open to his goodness in Christ, we also begin to see the ways in which we can respond to his love. God’s mercy enables us to see. *Amen.*