

**A sermon preached by
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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
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**Texts: Genesis 28:10-22
Mark 4:35-41**

PILLOW PROMISES

It is one of those details of travel that can make a huge difference. Soft, hard, feather, or foam, a pillow can either lead to a restful sleep, or to an awkward and restless night. Fortunately, for Jacob, the pillow he finds in today's scripture lesson is a smooth, flat rock, still warm from the afternoon sun. And it is a pillow comfortable enough to usher him into blessed sleep—to usher him into redemptive sleep—to help him escape from **the** most miserable day of his life. Yes, there in the deep darkness of night, Jacob experiences the fresh and promising presence of God.

Do you remember the first part of Jacob's story? Brother of Esau, son of Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob has been forced to leave home—to leave tradition and comfort and identity. Why? Because he has been manipulated by his mother, despised by his older brother, blessed but exiled by his father – yes, Jacob is leaving home because he has stolen his brother's birthright – which by tradition should go to the older brother not the younger brother. And so, Jacob has become an orphan in the wilderness—cut off from the familiarity of the past and clueless about what the future holds. For Jacob, time is holding its breath. Trying to escape the stress, and paralyzed by fear and guilt, Jacob finds a pillow and falls into the deep abyss of sleep.

Commentators delight in pointing out that Genesis is chock full of stories about dysfunctional families. Drunken Noah. Murderous Cain and Abel. Gang rape and incest. Sibling rivalry. Violence and infertility and sexual abuse. Yes, in scripture, we human beings are a sorry mess. And the story of Jacob is no exception. And yet, and yet, one of the conundrums of this story is, that despite sin and brokenness and deception, God is still at work. Despite treachery and banishment and rage and guilt, God is still blessing Jacob, God is pushing Jacob, God is filling Jacob, God is changing Jacob. Yes, God is calling Jacob to follow in the footsteps of his father, Isaac, and his grandfather, Abraham – to live into God's vision of covenant wholeness for all God's people.

Today as summer heats up and the virus continues to destroy;
today as some of you find yourself in a wilderness of loneliness and anxiety and unknown futures;
today as our country is being dragged through a moral battle over face masks;
today as the wilderness of the world is beset by racial tensions, economic uncertainty, environmental decay;
yes, today we learn the truth about wilderness stories.

If Jacob had not been cast into the barren stretches between the comfortable past and the unknown future, he would never have been able to do what God created and blessed him to do. The womb of wilderness is a birthing place for new life—true for Jacob, true for Moses, true for Jesus. And true for us in all the wilderness moments of our living.

Jacob's ladder is the first explicitly recorded dream in the Bible. Freud understood dreams to be the residue of the previous day—the result of unfinished anxieties and wishes and needs of the soul. Carl Jung was more positive—suggesting that dreams can actually change us—giving us the energy and vision to become what we dream.

And so Jacob dreams about a ladder, firmly rooted in the dust of now, but transcending into the mystery of the future—the mystery of life with God, and for God, and in God's heart. And scurrying up and down this ladder are angels—messengers coming and going—giving hints, tips, energy, encouragement on Jacob's journey toward God.

Like some of you, I have been caught up in the anxieties and changes happening at Ladue Chapel - long term staff people retiring, old systems and structures upended by the pandemic, new ways of worshiping demanding a huge technological shift, an unknown timeline for opening up our building, a pastoral search still moving forward, faithfully and hopefully.

None of these things are in your control – none of these things are in my control – and so we just take one day at a time, preparing for God knows what. Like Jacob, Ladue Chapel – and perhaps your life and mine - are caught between a known past and an unknown future.

Thank goodness there have been some angels in my life in the midst of all the uncertainties. One of them is my three-year old grandson Elijah, who does not seem to have a care in this troubled world. Instead he sees everything with eyes of wonder. He devours books about animals and people and God. He giggles and wiggles constantly. And he seems to rest in the arms of an utterly trustworthy world.

All of which reminds me of Jesus's words - unless we become like little children, we will not inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, my friends – we are called to relax, to trust, to enjoy – because God is in charge. Easier said than done. But these are the kind of angels we need – running up and down, and in and out of our lives calling us to our better selves, our creative selves – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Perhaps you were struck as I was this last week by the story of the woman in Jacksonville, Florida who wanted to visit her husband in the memory care unit of his nursing home. She had promised him she would visit him every day – to ground him in the love they had shared for so many years. But the pandemic put a stop to her visits. So, she did the next best thing. The nursing home offered her a job as a dishwasher, which she eagerly accepted. So, when she is not scrubbing pots and pans in the basement kitchen, she is free to visit her husband – keeping the promises she has made. The angels in Jacob's dream this morning are the promise keepers – assuring Jacob that in the midst of the wilderness of his exile – God is present – the angels are

connecting the ordinary messes of earthly life with the everlasting blessings of God – “I am with you, I will keep you, I will protect you – no matter what.”
I wonder, my friends, if we believe these promises? Do we recognize angels in our everyday lives – messengers of God who are blessing us and keeping us?

There is one more detail of this story that speaks to us—at this unfinished point in our journeys - and it is Jacob’s response—Jacob’s promise—back to God. This is NOT one of the better moments in scripture! Did you hear the ambivalence? Did you hear the half-heartedness? Did you hear the human hesitancy of Jacob’s promise? Jacob gets up early in the morning. He takes the stone—turning it from a pillow into an altar. And this is what he says:

Hey, God, **if** you are with me,
 if you travel with me,
 if you give me bread to eat,
 if you give me clothing to wear—
 IF...IF....IF...
 it is only then that I will let you be my God;
 it is only then that I will worship you.
 It is only then that I will submit my body and soul to your power
 and your presence in my life.

Dear, dear Jacob, dear, dear Ladue Chapel, we don’t quite get it, do we?

This bargaining, this negotiating with God is not the healthiest way, not the joyful way, not the liberating way to go. And until Jacob enters into another night years later, another dream where he is drawn into a wrestling match with God—it is not until Jacob finally submits to the overwhelming reality of God in his life —it is not until that moment of trust and obedience that Jacob is able to completely receive God’s blessing and grace—it is not until then that Jacob is free to become all that he has been created to be.

There is, of course, another story in scripture about a pillow. It is a story about Jesus asleep in a boat with the disciples. A storm is raging all around them and the disciples are frantic-terrified that the waves of uncertainty and conflict and change may drown them. And there is Jesus, sound asleep on a pillow—without a care in the world. And the disciples can’t believe it.

Jesus, wake up! Jesus, help us!

Jesus, don’t you care that our safe, predictable lives are disintegrating?
Well, you know the rest. Calmly Jesus wakes up. Calmly Jesus stills the storm. And calmly Jesus rebukes all of us. “O ye of little faith. Don’t you remember the promise—the promise to Abraham and Sarah; the promise to Jacob; the promise to Moses and Miriam; the promise to Mary; the promise to the shepherds; the promise at the cross, at the tomb? Don’t you remember the promise at your own baptism? Don’t you remember the promise I made on that mountain top at my final moment of departure? Do not be afraid, for lo I am with you always. And together,

as partners and co-creators, we will make God's dream, God's shalom, come true for all the families of the earth."

Thanks be to God for the power and the promise and the presence of our Living God – who promises to be with us – in our sleepy dreams and in our waking hours – during chapters of uncertainty and seasons of change.

Friends, there are angels all around us, reminding us of this promise. And they are calling us to become angels of healing and hope for each other.

May it be so for you and for me! Amen!