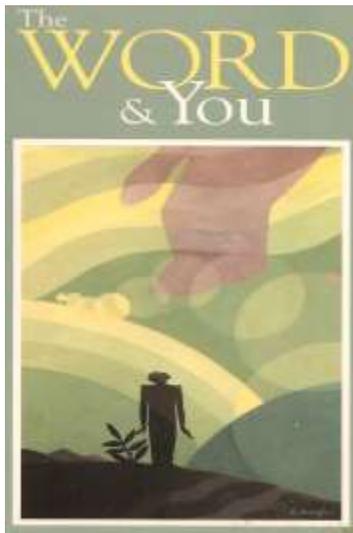


Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. 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. 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. 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; 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. 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." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "surely the Lord is in this place---and I did not know it!" 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." So 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. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.



"Place of Blessing"

The first step, in the twelve steps of the 1,500 year old Benediction spiritual way to inner freedom, is to recognize the presence of God. Joan Chittister wrote: The first step to inner freedom is to recognize the presence of God in all of life. God is not a spying, crouching parent waiting to catch us at sin. God is not a goal to be won or a prize to be merited. God is not something to deal with at the end of life. Nor can we "earn" God. Whatever our moral state, we already have God and we must not forget it. And if God is with us then we already have everything we need. We may not be everything we could be. We may be weak, struggling, hiding from ourselves and always in some kind of need. But down deep where the soul is forced to confront itself we know who we really are and who we are not. The first step to inner freedom—recognize the presence of God—reminds us that God is in every pore of life. God is the grace, the energy, the creative moment. God is in the now. God is in you, so you are a precious part of the universe.

And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,
"Surely the Lord is in this place---and I did not know it!"
And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!"

(Gen. 28:16-17a)

No surprise that fear gripped the scoundrel Jacob when he recognized the presence of the Lord, the God of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, who knew about his years of lying and cheating to get what he wanted. But what a big surprise that God would bless this unfaithful self-serving scoundrel by activating Words of God's Promises that lay forgotten within. Jacob was awe struck with the unlikely truth that the purposes of the Lord could be done in the midst of his web of self-interest and self-seeking motives. Jacob had given up imagining that he could ever be a precious part of God's larger vision for the world. No longer could he say to himself, "God doesn't work through imperfect people like me". But God did. When Jacob was afraid, alone, and on the run, the Lord visited Jacob when he slept. Coming to Jacob in a dream when he could not put up

any “Keep out”, “Private”, or “Do not disturb” signs, the Lord presented him with a future which did not dwell on the shame of the past. The vision of the ladder shattered the lived world of Jacob. Jacob thought he travelled alone, living only to survive. God was neither on his mind nor relevant to his situation. The vision of the ladder made for the possibility that earth and daily life was precisely the place where the Lord intrudes with promises of God’s love and transforming power.

“This is none other than the house of God;
this is the gate of heaven.”
(Gen. 28:17b)

The Lord’s promise was the standard one given to Israel: That through the gift of land and descendants, God’s people would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. In verse 15, Words from God’s own mouth God clarified how the promise would be fulfilled. God said: “I am with you.” To the abandoned fugitive, God gave God’s self, a gift of PRESENCE. This same promise was later given to Jeremiah, another soul in trouble; to Isaiah for a people in exile; to Jesus in his name, Emmanuel---which means ‘God with us’; to Matthew’s church in Jesus’ last words: “I am with you always”. Next God said: “I will keep you wherever you go”. Here God promised action, PROTECTION to a man who thought he could go it alone. Lastly God said: “And I will bring you back to this land”. To a displaced man who belonged nowhere, God gave Jacob The Heavenly Word that the Lord would bring him HOME.

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 the place Bethel, though the city used to be called Uz.
(Gen. 28:18-19)

When Jacob believed in the promises of Divine Presence, Protection, and Homecoming, his fearful place of vulnerability and loneliness was replaced with assurance in his soul, that whatever the future might bring, he would be tethered by the

Word of the Lord, and safely held in the palm of God’s hand. He called that holy place, Bethel, which means “House of God”. When I was a chaplain at M.D. Anderson Cancer Institute Hospital in Houston, Texas, a woman came into the chaplaincy office to say good-bye to me. Before she left she wanted to tell me about how her husband’s feelings of fear, desperation, confusion, and vulnerability upon coming to Houston for treatment, and her guilt about having to return home to work and leave him alone, changed when Bethel United Church of Christ took him under their wing. In the midst of that congregation, he experienced a homecoming of the holy kind. By connecting with God in worship and with others through fellowship and ministries within the church, her husband became a new man. Growing in faith and hope, the devastating reality of his disease lost its power over him.

Sometimes when we imagine Jacob’s ladder reaching down to transform his life, we think that he had some sort of faith advantage over us. That we, who have never had visionary dreams cannot have our stone-cold souls warmed and faith imaginations awakened too. But this is just not true, because after the dream ended, the Words of Promise that the Lord spoke to Jacob were written down as Holy Scripture... so that through study of God’s Word, The Lord’s Presence, Protection, and Homecoming can come alive in us . . . even when we least expect it, or when we feel we don’t deserve it.

Brother, do you love my Jesus,
Sister, do you love my Jesus,
Christian, do you love my Jesus.
Soldiers of the cross.
(from the hymn, 'We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder')

We study the Christian version of Jacob’s story in the spiritual tune, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder. In verse three, we sing of our love for Jesus, who, as The Word of God Made Flesh, through the power of the Holy Spirit, guides us back home to the heart of God, and does the reconciling work of the Risen Christ. Surely, the Presence of the Lord is in this place of blessing.