

## "The Better Angels of Our Nature"

Rev. Peter Bynum  
July 23, 2017

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward 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... (Genesis 28:10-19a)*

As this passage begins, Jacob is on the run for his life. He has tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and deluded his father to claim the family blessing for himself. An enraged Esau has pledged that, as soon as the aging Isaac has passed, he will exact murderous revenge on his cheating little brother. Having been warned by his mother, Jacob flees to seek refuge in his uncle Laban's house. As night falls on his first night away, he takes the most comfortable-looking rock he can find for a pillow and has this heavenly dream.

We usually refer to the vision he is given as "Jacob's Ladder," but the motion on the structure suggests that "staircase" may be a better word, for it is crowded with heavenly traffic. God's angels - the messengers, agents, warriors and protectors of heaven -- are actively ascending and descending the steps. Artists from every generation have imagined what this dazzling vision may have looked like, but I am more entranced by a theological question. **Why** are these angels moving up and down? Where are they going? Where have they been? What have they been doing? This angelic choreography must mean something. But what does it mean?

These are the kinds of questions that Jewish "midrash" seeks to answer. Midrash is a body of early commentary and interpretative literature that rabbis developed to help explain the Torah.<sup>1</sup> One answer found in these commentaries suggests that the angels in Jacob's dream are coming and going from tasks assigned to them by God. The ascending angels have completed their work and are returning home, while the descending angels are just going out on their heavenly errands.<sup>2</sup>

However, I am drawn to a different explanation offered by the Jewish philosopher Philo, who lived around the time of Jesus. Philo classified humanity into three basic groups or classes: the Wise, the Evil, and a big group in the middle. He called this middle group the "Practisers," in the sense that these people are still practicing the art of being good. They bounce around in the wide space between good and evil, encountering both successes and failures, wins and losses, ups and

<sup>1</sup> "Midrash," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Tan, "Theological Themes - Genesis 28:10-19a," <https://www.goodpreacher.com/journalread.php?id=2159>.

downs. Based on this dream, Philo saw Jacob as the archetype of the "Practiser," the best biblical example of the person who is pulled and torn between good and bad. He thought the staircase in Jacob's dream represented Jacob himself (his life, his spirit, his soul) and that the angels on the staircase represented the ups and downs of Jacob's life. In Philo's view, each angel ascending the staircase symbolized Jacob's spiritual wins -- those things that are drawing him closer to heaven -- while each angel going down the staircase reflected his many falls from grace.<sup>3</sup> Seen in this way, Jacob's vision paints a picture of the ups and downs of those of us who find ourselves living in between good and bad, between faithfulness and failure. It is a vision that speaks to every Practiser, people who are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, people like you and like me.

When he took the oath of office for the first time, President Abraham Lincoln stood on the Capitol Steps and looked out over a nation of Practisers. It was March 4, 1861. A number of states had already seceded from the Union, and the threat of impending war cast a dark and ominous shadow over the inaugural festivities. Lincoln had been forced to enter the capital by a secret route, because the threats on his life were already so grave. There was a great deal of debate in those days over what was good and bad, right and wrong, in our national policy. The inaugural address Lincoln gave spoke directly the difficulties of slavery, states' rights and the need to defend and protect the Union. He closed this critical address with these words:

*"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."<sup>4</sup>*

As he looked over a nation that was clearly stretched between good and evil, Lincoln expressed a confidence that the right would ultimately win out over the wrong, that the messengers that seemed to be drawing the country down into the abyss would eventually be overwhelmed by the ones that were ascending to the light. He expressed confidence in "the better angels of our nature."

Jacob gives us the same kind of hope. In the grand scope of scripture, it would be difficult to find a more mixed bag of a person. On the darker side, his very name was a Hebrew play on the word for "heel." Taking the cue from the fact that he was born clutching his brother's heel, the name his parents give to him suggests that he was, from the very beginning, a "heel catcher," a "leg puller," one who is fine with jumping the line and circumventing the rules. Seemingly willing to do pretty much anything to get ahead, he becomes a notorious con man, willing to cheat his brother, his father, his uncle and his wives. He gets rich on deception and foul play. There was a reason that so many of the angels on the ladder of his soul were descending in his dream, because there were so many ways that he fell short of God's righteousness.

Even so, there are also things that he does right. When his parents give him clear instructions, he proves himself to be very loyal and obedient. Despite his many deceits, one cannot help but admire, at least a little bit, the ambition and energy that Jacob has. He may be cheating, but we have to admit that he is always working hard at whatever he is doing. God seems to see these things as well. As pastor Sharon Tan once wrote, *"perhaps God looked down from the top of the stairway and saw the raw material of Jacob's ambition—his desire to be great and powerful, but*

---

<sup>3</sup> Sami Yli-Karjanmaa, "Philo on Jacob's Ladder: Dream Interpretation or Allegory As Usual?" [http://users.abo.fi/sylikarj/Yli-Karjanmaa\\_Philos%20on%20Jacobs%20Ladder.pdf](http://users.abo.fi/sylikarj/Yli-Karjanmaa_Philos%20on%20Jacobs%20Ladder.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres31.html>

*perhaps also his desire to encounter God. So God responds. "If I can just train that ambition, I can use this person.""<sup>5</sup>*

Whatever negativity we may see in him, we cannot deny that Jacob -- the trickster, the manipulator, the cheater and heel -- is obviously God's chosen one. "The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring," God says. "Your family shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth... and not only that, all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Despite all of the descents, all of these angels are ascending in Jacob's life, rising up into the promise and presence of God.

So, Jacob -- the one who would come to symbolize all of Israel, and, by extension, all of us -- was not all good, but he wasn't all bad, either. Like us, he was usually somewhere in the middle, somewhere in the in between of righteousness and evil. At any given time, there were angels of his spirit climbing up and dropping down. His soul was always a mixed bag of ascending and descending. Luckily for him, God was always betting on the better angels of his nature, knowing that in the end, they would be enough for the Promise.

And so it is for us. If we on this Lord's Day are not feeling particularly good about our spiritual practicing, if we feel like our slips down the ladder of faith are outpacing our steps up, then the story of Jacob gives us great reason to hope. I expect there are some things in your life of faith you feel you are doing well, areas where you feel like you are making progress. Maybe your prayer life feels good right now. Maybe you are finding yourself giving more to others in charity and service. But there are probably also some things that we do not feel as good about, areas where we feel like we are slipping down the ladder of perfection.

There is an old joke in the church about the man who was always answering the altar call to come down and receive a blessing. Whenever he felt like he had slipped up, he would come down the aisle yelling out with passion "Fill me, Lord! Fill me!" It happened all the time, until one Sunday someone in the congregation finally yelled out "Don't do it, Lord! He leaks!"

The truth is that all of us leak. The blessings that God pours into our lives don't tend to stay long. They get tainted either by the bad things that we do or by the overwhelming power of sin that remains around us in this world. In our lives of faith, all of us are climbing up and slipping down all the time. We gain ground and then lose it.

In this reality, there is a powerful prayer that we can all pray. We can offer the same prayer for our own spirits that Abraham Lincoln prayed for the spirit of our nation. In short, we can pray for the better angels of our nature -- that they would be strengthened in us... that, even in the conflicts and shadows of life, they would take greater hold of us... that we would listen more closely to the good that they want for us and the light they kindle within us.

And as we pray this prayer, we can be reminded that, even when we lose faith in him, God has never lost faith in us. God is well aware of our descending angels, but God always keeps his eyes on the ones that are going up. And so the promise he made to Jacob has been handed down to us. We, too, are chosen, despite all the things that drag us down.

"Know," God says, "that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

So go in peace fellow Practisers, and be encouraged, for God's eyes are always looking to the better angels of our nature.

Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Tan, "Theological Themes - Genesis 28:10-19a," <https://www.goodpreacher.com/journalread.php?id=2159>.