

**The Wonder of it All**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
June 20, 2021-AM Service  
Reverend Ruth Boven  
Genesis 28:10-17

I chose this Old Testament story to preach this morning because I love the Jacob stories. I preached not long ago on Jacob wrestling with God. But this story, this one is my favorite. It's my favorite because it's filled with wonder. And it's my conviction that *wonder* is something we could all use more of.

Sometimes, when something becomes a regular part of our life—we start to take it for granted. We fail to wonder at it anymore. For example, the ability to read. When was the last time you were amazed at the fact that your eyes see simple line-and-dot symbols on a page, and those symbols get translated into words in your left occipital-temporal cortex? And from those words, your brain through complex neurological functions, draws information and meaning, and formulates thoughts and understanding.

I thought about that recently when I read an article in which the author, Debie Thomas, describes how she learned to read. She was three years old when her immigrant mother emptied out a closet in their Boston apartment—the only space they could spare, and installed a tiny table and two chairs she found at the flea market. Not able to afford teaching materials, her mother would cut words and pictures out of magazines and greeting cards, and scotch-tape them to the closet walls. Debie remembers her mother taking great care to arrange the scraps. Every morning, she would sit at the tiny table with her mother, surrounded by her mother's word-and-picture tapestry. Mom would point, and Debie would read, matching pictures to letters, symbols to meaning. Kitten. Puppy. Horse. Rainbow.

As soon as she would master one set of images and letters, mom would replace them with new ones. Often at night, to be discovered in the morning. The author said, "I remember feeling as if the walls were alive—an organic, ever-changing picture book. Fence. Table. Girl. Boy. Rock. Tree. As my skills improved, she taught me the words she considered more important and more beautiful than all others" says Thomas, "In the beginning, God." "The Lord is my shepherd." "For God so loved the world." "And the Word became flesh."

What Debie's mother was doing was installing in her daughter a sense of wonder. She was condescending to her level of understanding by giving her tiny, beautiful glimpses of a bigger world that learning to read would gradually reveal. John Calvin taught that God does something like that for us. God accommodates to our small capacity for understanding by giving us glimpses of revelation in God's Word and in the world around us. Sometimes, whether we're comfortable with it or not, God uses dreams and visions to condescend to us. Both the Old and New Testaments contain many such events. So for just a few minutes I invite you to consider with me the wonders revealed in Jacob's dream.

The first thing to notice in our story is Jacob's discovery that he lives in a world he did not make and cannot control. When Jacob places his head on that stone and falls to sleep and sees that ladder with angels going up and down it—the voice in the dream makes clear who's in charge. And it's not Jacob. At the top of the ladder stood the Lord. And in God's brief communication to Jacob, God declares no less than seven things about who God is and about what God will do. "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you the land on which you're lying. I am with you. I will watch over you. I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised."

Who's writing and directing and is the main actor in the unfolding story of Jacob's life? Clearly it's someone transcendent to Jacob. Clearly, it's God.

I know, all too well, that one of the hardest things to come to terms with in life is that I am not in charge. I do not get to make the rules for this world. Our world belongs to God. I am creature, not creator. Like Job, I must stand in humble awe and repentance and wonder and say "No. I was not there when you laid the foundation of the earth—when you placed its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy! No-It is you God, who gave the horse its might and clothed its neck with mane. It's not by my wisdom but yours that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward

the south or that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high. You have commanded the morning since our days began, and caused the dawn to know its place. It's you. You are God. And I am not."

We, like Jacob, forget that sometimes, that we live in our world not of our own making. Jacob, in his dream, was given the gift of re-orientation, of seeing again the world as it really is, with God, the only one capable of sustaining this world as its Creator of it, poised at attention at the helm—with Jacob and Jacob's ladder at his feet.

That vision must be our vision too. The commentator, Craig Barnes, put it this way, "When I wake up in the morning, I can jump in the shower, grab a cup of coffee, and rush off to work to be productive. Inevitably that will destine me to a day of running. Like Jacob, I will be either running to make something happen, or running away because it didn't happen as it was supposed to. But if sometime in the morning I become still with prayer and the words of God, then it will occur to me that all of the important things have already been accomplished today. The sun came up and the earth stayed on its axis without any help from me. I have awakened to a world I did not create to receive a salvation I did not earn."

The first wonder is the wonder of God's transcendence—that we live and breathe and have our being in a world not of our own making. The second wonder is that the ladder is not there for Jacob to climb. In fact, it isn't Jacob's ladder at all. The second wonder is that God extends God's ladder down to a scoundrel like Jacob. The second wonder is the wonder of God's grace.

You see, up until now, Jacob imagined that if he could climb the ladder of birthrights and family privileges and success, then he himself could pull down a blessing from heaven. But it doesn't work that way. That's not how blessing comes to us. The blessing of heaven is not something we strive for. It is a gift to be received. It is extended to us, ladder-like down to those who have not earned it, who do not deserve it. It reaches down even to scoundrels and strivers like Jacob. And me. And you.

I read that some ancient peoples constructed their homes by driving a great stake into the ground and then building the home around the center pole. The pole symbolized the center of the world and the heavens around them. It was their axis mundi. Something like their ladder from heaven. It gave their homes a sense of order and purpose. When disasters would strike, they rushed to the center pole where heaven and earth were held together.

Again, Craig Barnes in his book *Hustling God*, proposes that for followers of Jesus, the empty cross is the great center pole that ties heaven to earth. When disaster strikes, only that cross offers perspective and understanding. The word disaster literally means 'away from the stars and heavens.' When you have lost your job, or when the lab report comes back with bad news, or when your heart is breaking for one of your children or grandchildren, it feels like earth has moved away from heaven. It is a disaster.

Where are you going to go when that happens? Are you going to run around more quickly, grabbing and striving? That won't help. The only hope is to go back to the center of the universe, go back to the ladder God extends to you, go back to the empty cross where you can always find the risen Savior waiting with grace and love beyond your imagining.

When Jacob wakes from his dream, he is filled with wonder. "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God...this is the gate of heaven."

Sisters and brothers at LaGrave, truly, it's a wonder to awake to a world we did not make, to receive a salvation we did not earn, and, finally, to realize that God's presence is right here with us. Surely God is with us—even when we know it not.

The house of God. The gate of heaven. Right in the middle of us this morning. Most of the time it's not hard at all to imagine the gate of heaven here at LaGrave in worship. When Larry or Jonathan swell the final verse of "Oh God Beyond All Praising," heaven feels near. When Peter pierces our hearts with the beauty and wonder of God's Holy Word, heaven feels close. When Bob baptizes a baby or helps us celebrate young but courageous faith—we hear heaven whispering. When Kristy puts words together that give our prayers wings—the gates of heaven feel open. When Mike calls us to trust that as we seek out the vulnerable and come close to the powerless we will find ourselves in the presence of God—the gate of

heaven feels upon us. These gifts of worship help us see Jesus, and to celebrate the wonder of God's grace extended to us through him.

But here's one final point. It's a critical one. As important and wonder-filled as our worship together is, this time of gathered worship is not the only or even the primary place of God's presence.

If you walk down to the corner of Division and Cherry and spend some time there, you will see the gate of heaven there too. It can show up in hospital rooms. In refugee camps. In addiction recovery centers. In prisons. In homeless shelters. It can show up anywhere in this wide, hurting world. And it does.

I've heard that as Mother Theresa served the poor and dying in Calcutta, she and the others would always begin their work by seeking Jesus in prayer. Then they would go out to the streets-to the stranger, the outcast, the hungry and dying, because they knew that's where they'd find him.

Friends at LaGrave, the wonder of it all is that God reaches down to us and opens the gate of heaven. With grace sufficient enough to cover all our selfish strivings, God extends his great love to us in Jesus. May the wonder of it all fill you with hope and faith and gratitude-as you keep believing and serving and proclaiming God's perfect love. Amen.

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