

**The Surprising God of Jacob**  
Sermon Series: Journeys with Jacob  
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Rev. Melanie Lee Carey

When I was young, I enjoyed playing a board game called Chutes and Ladders. The game is simple enough that even very young children can play it. The object is to get from the bottom of the board to the top by using the ladders drawn on the board. There is a spinner and when you find what number you have, you move forward the allotted spaces, careful to avoid landing on the spaces where the chutes or slides are—because if you land there, you fall all the way to the bottom of the shoot and you have to pick yourself up and start climbing all over again.

After playing Chutes and Ladders many times in a row, I would, just for fun, reverse the rules and have the ladders be the chutes and the chutes be the ladders. We usually assume that ladders are for climbing up, why can't they also be for coming down?

Our biblical text for today is an ancient story about Chutes and Ladders. It is also a surprising story about God and a man named Jacob. In the story, like in the game I mentioned earlier, we assume that ladders are meant for climbing. But a careful look at the story in Genesis reveals that "Jacob's ladder" does not begin with Jacob climbing. It begins with Jacob sleeping. And the ladder does not represent a means by which Jacob can get close to God, but the means by which God can get through to Jacob.

Jacob was the younger brother who stole his older brother Esau's birthright and blessing. Jacob was the younger brother who played his nearly blind father Isaac for a fool. Jacob was the grabber—the one born hanging onto the heel of his twin brother Esau—the one who thought life was all about climbing up the ladder's rungs of life to get what you need and want most.

And all of this background provides the context for this dream he had about "the ladder." It happened just after Jacob ripped off Esau for the second time and was making his getaway to the north. He'd left so quickly, he hadn't taken the time to assemble a bedroll. Using a stone for a pillow, he prepared to go to sleep. And contrary to our

belief that the guilty should toss and turn all night on account of their conscience, Jacob drifted off quickly and slept like a baby.

Which is when he dreamed of the ladder. It bridged the distance between earth and heaven ... with the rungs being used by large numbers of angels, racing up and down. And beside Jacob stood God, having descended the same ladder.

But instead of giving Jacob the "dressing down" he deserved, God tells Jacob, not only will I accompany you, but I will protect you and I will bring you home. And the surprising thing is that Jacob didn't climb up the ladder to God. Instead God climbed down the ladder to Jacob. Right there in the middle of nowhere—God climbs down into Jacob's life and blesses him—telling him, I am with you always, I will keep you and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We expect that Jacob will have a long climb ahead of him. We expect the climb—just as the song says "every round goes higher, higher—we are climbing Jacob's ladder." We assume that it is all about OUR climbing. But the truth is this ladder is one we don't have to climb—instead God comes down the ladder to us—Instead God comes down to us and blesses us right in the mess we are living in.

This ladder. it turns out is not for climbing, but rather is a way for God to get into Jacob's life and heart. This ladder, it turns out, is not for climbing, but rather is God's way of telling Jacob that there are still a few things in this world you can't climb up and get. This ladder, it turns out was God's message to Jacob's heart and soul. Jacob sleeps and dreams and God climbs down the ladder and stands with Jacob saying- I am with you always, I will keep you in my arms and when you are ready to come on home, you and your family will dwell in my house forever.

It's all very surprising because like Jacob, we assume that ladders are meant for climbing. Like Jacob we assume that it is all up to us. We assume that it all depends on us and our efforts. We spend our lives focused on whether we have the technology, the strength, and the will to climb higher and higher, the faster the better. But the truth is the God of Jacob comes down the ladder to us. The truth is the God of Jacob, and Joseph, the God of Jeremiah and Job, the God of Mary and Martha, our God is one who comes to us—one who with Jesus says: No climbing is involved—I am with you, I will keep you and you will dwell in my house forever. This is the truth.

And it surprises us each and every time—God’s amazing grace which is free and unconditional. No climbing required. All it requires is our open heart and our willingness to receive this amazing gift. Sounds simple but of course to receive the gift, we have to get off the ladder. We have to let go of the rungs and stop the climbing—for we can’t hold onto the ladder and receive the gift at the same time—too much is in our hands—to receive the gift, we have to let go, trust and believe.

Out there in the wilderness, with a stone for a pillow, Jacob lets go of the ladder. He stops climbing and opens his heart. Out there in the wilderness, Jacob wakes up from his dream and says “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I didn’t know it.” (verse 16). Fully awake now, Jacob makes the decision to change his life. Jacob decides right then and there on different life goals—on a new way of living without ladder climbing. Right there in the wilderness, Jacob makes a promise to God. Of course being Jacob, it is a conditional promise—and one that he will have to revisit again. But the point is that he begins his new life and he steps off the ladder and stops climbing. And as we continue his story next week, we will see that it is a process—this letting go of the ladder—this living without climbing thing—but for this moment, Jacob is saying he is going to live differently with God. To mark the moment, Jacob takes his stone pillow, pours some oil on it and plants it on its end in the ground. He then proclaims this unknown spot to be called “Bethel”—which means house of God.

Jacob, whose whole life had been about climbing, and knocking people who were in his way out of it— declares that he will get off the ladder and live with God in his heart—climber no more, if God will be with him. Of course God will be with him, that was what God’s coming down the ladder was all about—but Jacob doesn’t know that yet. And sometimes we forget this as well. The God of Jacob is one who comes down the ladder to us. The God of Jacob, our God is one who comes to us and declares: let go of the ladder and live with me. For I am with you always, I will keep you and you will dwell in my house forever.

Perhaps best known for being played as the great ship Titanic was sinking, the hymn “Nearer my God to Thee” was written with Jacob’s story in mind. Poet and actress Sarah Flower Adams wrote the words when her pastor said that he would be preaching on the story of Jacob at Bethel and that he couldn’t find a fitting hymn to close the service.

The talented Sarah picked up her Bible and read this story of Jacob’s dream over and over. Then she picked up her pen and the complete five stanzas of the hymn poured out all in one sitting.<sup>1</sup>

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!  
 E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me;  
 Still all my song would be nearer, my God, to Thee,  
 Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,  
 Darkness be over me, my rest a stone;  
 Yet in my dreams I'd be nearer, my God, to Thee,  
 Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

There let the way appear steps unto heav'n;  
 All that Thou sendest me in mercy giv'n;  
 Angels to beckon me nearer, my God, to Thee,  
 Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

Then with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise,  
 Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;  
 So by my woes to be nearer, my God, to Thee,  
 Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

Like Jacob, we assume that all ladders are for climbing. We make our plans, and set our goals, always with the climb in mind.

God surprises us by being nearer—coming down the ladder to us and inviting us to live anew. May we like Jacob let go of the rungs, mark the spot and vow: The Lord shall be my God.

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<sup>i</sup> Emurian, Ernest. Living Stories of Famous Hymns. Baker Book House Grand Rapids, Michigan 1978 p.92