

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Genesis 28:10-19a

**SERMON SERIES:** Lessons from the Life of Jacob

**SERMON TITLE:** Make Up There Come Down Here

Today we're continuing our four part series on *Lessons from the Life of Jacob*. As we come to this morning's text, Genesis 28:10-19a, Jacob is on the run. He's cheated his elder brother Esau out of Esau's birthright; he's deceived their father Isaac so that the blessing rightfully belonging to Esau was bestowed instead upon Jacob. And Esau is furious; he's vowed to kill Jacob.

So Jacob runs to Haran and his uncle Laban's house. But on the way, in the middle of nowhere, at a place that was nothing special, Jacob dreams a dream. Listen for the word of God.

#### **SCRIPTURE LESSON**

Have you ever had a dream like Jacob's dream? He saw *a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God...ascending and descending on it*. And Jacob heard God speaking to him: *I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac....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*.

When Jacob woke up from his sleep, this place in the middle of nowhere that had been nothing special had become holy ground. Jacob 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*. He then named that place Bethel, which means *the house of God*.

Imagine that! An ordinary place in the middle of nowhere—an earthly place—a place that was infected with Jacob's fear and his guilt—was, in fact, a gateway to heaven. And in his

dream Jacob came to see that there is indeed divine traffic between heaven and earth. God is not confined to up there; God is actively involved down here!

But at first, Jacob couldn't see it. And even we have difficulty seeing it, don't we? We have difficulty seeing it even though we follow Jesus Christ—God with us—the Word made flesh. We have difficulty seeing it even though we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us: ***Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

We have difficulty seeing it because earth can be an inhospitable place for human beings, not to mention God. The cross is a reminder of this fact. But beyond the cross there are wars, terrorist attacks, violence in homes and on school yards, starving children, economic downturns, foreclosures on homes, broken marriages, addictions of one kind or another, deception, mistrust, and on and on it goes. So who wouldn't prefer heaven? Earth is a messy place so why wouldn't God choose to stay up there rather than come down here?

Well, the earth is an inhospitable place, but God has not left us alone. There is traffic between heaven and earth. And when we're able to see the world around us—as ordinary and ugly as it often is—as the place of God's presence and even see ourselves as a means that God uses to inhabit the earth, then extraordinary things are possible.

Let me share with you a story told by John Ortberg about three women who are members of the church he serves. These three women attended a retreat together and on this retreat they started "dreaming" about what might happen if they allowed a little bit of heaven to come to earth through them. Eventually they sought out one of their pastors to tell him about their dreams. He asked them: ***What do you want to do?*** They told him they wanted to save all the babies in Africa.

Now the pastor noted that this was a pretty big job for a starter project, so he asked them if they were willing to begin by spending a day helping out an under-resourced school in the neighboring community of East Palo Alto, CA.

You see, these women lived in Palo Alto, CA, which is separated from East Palo Alto, CA, by highway 101. Palo Alto is the home of Stanford University and Silicon Valley. It was listed recently in *Forbes* magazine as the number one area in the world to live in if you want to get rich. East Palo Alto, on the other hand, is an under-resourced community right next door; a few years ago it led the nation in murders per capita.

Well, the women said “yes” to their pastor’s challenge so they began to pray an interesting prayer: *God, make up there come down here for this little school in East Palo Alto.* And from this prayer an idea came: How about having one thousand people from our church give up a day to plant trees and tile floors and paint murals at this school?

Now there was some skepticism in the church about the viability of this dream, but as it turned out, the women had to stop registering volunteers when they hit twelve hundred people. They simply couldn’t accommodate anymore.

And the best part was seeing God present and at work in ways that no one could have anticipated or planned. For example, some people were talking to an East Palo Alto city official about this project at a Starbucks, and he told the store manager, *You ought to donate enough coffee for all these people on Saturday morning.* And the Starbucks guy said, *Okay.*

The city official decided to go for broke: *You ought to deliver it too.* And the Starbucks guy said, *Okay.*

The three women went to Home Depot. They had no titles or credentials, just a conviction that God would help them bring up there to down here. They told the Home Depot

guy what they were up to, and then said: *We need \$10,000 worth of equipment. We don't have any money for this—you ought to just donate it.* And the Home Depot guy said, *Okay.* So they got \$10,000 worth of material free.

They were talking to a woman who doesn't attend the church. She too said, *Okay* and the school ended up getting \$20,000 worth of playground material for free.

For a whole day there was music blaring and balloons flying and five-year-olds serving next to eighty-five-year-olds and people working together from churches of every stripe and ethnicity. *It was the single most joyous day I have seen a church have,* Ortberg said.<sup>1</sup> And it was all because of a single prayer: ***God, make up there come down here.***

Now when Jacob realized that God was present in the place where he was, he took the stone that he had used as a pillow, set it up, poured oil over it, and left it as a marker that this place was indeed holy ground. But in Jesus Christ we see that the markers of holy ground are no longer of stone but of flesh and blood. In other words, God uses us to make up there come down here. So the question is: ***How is God using us to make up there come down here?***

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<sup>1</sup> Ortberg, John. *God is Closer Than You Think.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.