

“Faced With A Cliff, And Armed With A Ladder”

Text: Genesis 28:10-22

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I imagine that almost anyone who has been paying to the news lately has heard about the "Fiscal Cliff." In case you haven't, the countdown to the "Fiscal Cliff" is on. Many observers see it as the day the U.S. economy risks falling into another recession. As each day passes the U.S. moves closer to the edge of the cliff, the level of fear slowly rises, people's anxiety about the future grows stronger. Many people look to the coming fiscal cliff and begin to experience that sinking feeling. Perhaps people see themselves going over the edge like the coyote in one of those old Roadrunner and Coyote cartoons. Like the one here where he is holding a sign that says, "That's all folks!"

As we encounter Jacob in this text from Genesis that Judith read for us this morning, he could have very easily been holding a sign or carrying the same thought in his own heart and mind that said, "That's all folks!." There's a good chance that Jacob believed that he had gone off the deep end. Certainly his father Isaac and his brother Esau would have thought that. Jacob was on the run. He was especially on the run from his brother Esau who he had just duped out of not only his birthright but his rightful blessing -basically his inheritance. And Jacob not only stole from his brother, he had deceived his father to do it.

So after all that, Jacob hits the road from Beersheba and heads in the direction of the land of Haran. This is an interesting direction for Jacob to be heading in. It is interesting because Haran is the land that God had called Jacob's grandfather Abraham from. Abraham being the first "man of faith" in the Bible. And God had called Abraham "out of" the land of Haran it's as if Jacob is going backwards here. He is undoing all of the good that has been done by his ancestors.

Jacob's present set of circumstances are depressing and do little to offer the reader any sense of optimism. Things are so bad for Jacob that when he settles down to sleep at night he has no one to stay with. He has no shelter, no bed, why he even has to use a stone for a pillow

he has sunk so low. Now I don't think anyone ever uses a stone for a pillow, why would you? The aim of the text is clear. We the ones listening to this story are to comprehend the dire circumstances in which Jacob finds himself. Circumstances that not only paint a dark picture of his present but appear to offer no bright hope for the future.

Hope for the future can be a rare commodity at almost any time. It seems that we're always on the countdown to the end of something. Before news of the fiscal cliff arrived, most papers were counting down the days that were left until the Mayan calendar ends. I pretty sure we've all heard of the so-called Mayan apocalypse now. The big deal being that a few years back someone noticed that the Mayan Calendar ended on Dec.21 of this year. So a lot of people began to believe that the Mayans must have been on to something. After all, the Mayan calendar is so accurate, why would it stop all of a sudden unless everything were to abruptly end. Some believe that it's not just the people who make a living out of selling Mayan calendars who should be worried about this. In fact, some of the recent numbers I looked at suggested that 1 in 11 people believe that the world will end.

I want for you to think about that for a moment because imagine how you would live your live if you believed the world was going to end. I'm pretty sure that we would make some different decisions and maybe do things we wouldn't normally do. We may become prone to spending sprees, running up credit, ignoring relationships, maybe slack off on the job. I know I was considering holding off on writing my sermon for Christmas Eve until after Dec. 21st just to make sure I wasn't wasting my time.

But I've noticed lately that the conversation has switched from the end of the Mayan Calendar to the so-called fiscal cliff. I don't think it really matters which end you focus on, to me it reveals just how dragged down people can become on circumstance. It's as if we want to be able to let circumstances rule us to the point that we have something to fear. Remember the hype and fear that came with Y2K and we enter the year 2000 not sure if the lights would stay on?

My friends there are a lot of people out there who feel as if they are near the end. Near the end not just figuratively but literally! Dystopian realities that paint a hopeless picture of the future are all around us. They come from science with images of environmental degradation,

from politicians who have us chugging over a fiscal cliff, from Mayan enthusiasts, from certain video game narratives and contemporary fiction that all point to a future that is a hopeless struggle. Have any of you heard of the Zombie apocalypse? There are people out there who are actually preparing for it! This is a world that finds it easier to believe in the possibility hell than in heaven.

The reality for many people is that we're in a downward spiral and it's just a matter of time until we reach the end and go off that cliff. When do you think it's going to be the end of the world? Over 80% of North Americans believe that the world is going to end in their life time. I would like to correct them by saying that for 100% of them their world will end in their lifetime. And I'm not just talking about those who think the world has come to an end when you don't respond immediately to their email or their text message either! There is a sense of resignation that accompanies a lot of people's lives these days.

But in this story from Genesis, God won't let Jacob resign himself to his circumstances. Even when his head is leaning on a hard stone while laying on the cold ground Jacob gets caught up in a dream that raises his head to heaven. He gets caught up in a dream of faith. The Book of Genesis gives us stories of faith. It especially gives us stories of faith beginnings. And here is the beginning of Jacob's faith in God. Jacob's father Abraham had his encounter with God and so did his father Isaac. But Jacob had no such encounter until in this story, when he is at the point when he has nothing else. Perhaps now he is ready to listen. That's one of the things that you'll notice in scripture is that God will usually speak to those who are poor first and foremost. That's why many liberation theologians will often refer to God as having a preferential option for the poor. It's not that God wants people to be poor, it's that God will work for the poor. Here Jacob is at a point when he has nothing and is ready to hear what God has to say.

And then he has this amazing dream that defies explanation. It is a dream of a great ladder or staircase or ramp that reaches to the heavens where the angels are ascending and descending. They are the heavenly messengers who symbolize that what Jacob is receiving here is a divine revelation. Jacobs moves his head up and down watching them but ultimately Jacob must raise his head up to God at the top of the stairway. The elevated place from where God speaks directly to Jacob. And God affirms Jacob for who he is, where he is. God says Jacob, I

am the Lord of your father and your grandfather and I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and spread all over the nations of it. I will be with you wherever you go and watch over you!"

What God is saying to Jacob is that, in spite of what you think your life might look like Jacob, in spite of your circumstances there is more to behold. Don't discount the importance of your life or somehow believe the end is near. God will go with him wherever he goes. Jacob's future is connected to the earth on which he stands. He also says that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through Jacob and his offspring. Remember Jacob at this point is no prize. He has nothing. Hard to see how he could afford to be married or have offspring. But this is the promise that calls him not to run his life off a cliff but climb the ladder of his dream. Instead of being left in his circumstances he is armed with a vision. And we know it's faith because he even pledges to give a tenth back to God out of what we will receive. Even though he has nothing, he had faith that he will have enough that he can give back. Jacob's ability to rise above the circumstances and have hope for the future is for him the beginning of faith. It is his own God-given faith that will be a blessing to others and connect him with all peoples.

You see that's what faith is. It's not something that sits and waits and looks around at how bad everything is and looks at the clock and counts down until the end and there is nothing left. Biblical faith is like a ladder or a ramp that allows us to rise above one perceived reality to envision another. It's not where we seek to escape the future or avoid the future, because it is only by faith that we have a promise for the future.

You see faith represents our possibility of any future at all. It's the things we believe in that get us out of bed in the morning. And faith becomes the vision combined with adventure. As Vaclav Havel said, "It is not enough to stare up the steps, we must step up the stairs." That's what Jacob's dream was, it revealed the ladder of faith in his life and he was willing to make the walk of faith along each rung. He moved from not knowing to knowing that God is present with him. The gift of faith is there for us to follow just as it was for Jacob. The call of Biblical faith is always the call to rise up. Lift up your hearts. Raise your heads. Go up into the house of God. Go up the mountain. Go up to Jerusalem. Or as Jesus said to the beggar, "Pick up your mat and walk."

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, "It is very dangerous to go into eternity with possibilities which one has oneself prevented from becoming realities. A possibility is a hint from God. One must follow it." One must follow the possibility if the faith that God offers us is ever to be realized in our own lives.

On this Grey Cup Sunday, I thought I would end with a little football. I'm not sure if many of you saw this, but earlier this month many news stations played a moving speech that was given by Chuck Pagano, the coach of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts following an upset win over the Miami Dolphins. Pagano had only a short time before been diagnosed with leukemia and had begun chemo. On the day of his team's victory Pagano had been released from the hospital for a day before he began another round of treatment. Standing in the locker room, dwarfed by a bunch of hulking players and coaches, the weakened Pagano removed his cap to reveal his balding head and began to speak. And said the following about his team's win. A team that most believed would remain at the bottom of the standings this year. He said,

"You guys were living in a vision and you weren't living in circumstance. You decided to live consciously as a team and as a family to live in a vision and that's how you bring things home like you did today. I have circumstances, we all have circumstances...I got circumstances but I'm living with a vision....it (his cancer) is already beat because I'm living with a vision."

You see, Chuck Pagano, gets it, he understands what Jacob understood. When you're faced with a cliff, you need to be armed with the ladder of faith that gets us to lift our heads from the stone cold circumstances to behold the vision of heaven. That faith will always lead us to victory because by that faith, we will always rise up to be more than our circumstances say we should be. Thanks be to God.