

**Sunday, July 19, 2020**  
**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11 (Year A)**

Genesis 28.10-19a; Romans 8.12-25

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2972247342879192>

*(Sermon begins at about 17:45)*

**“Know That I Am with You and Will Keep You Wherever You Go”**

When I hear our Old Testament reading—what is commonly referred to as the story of Jacob’s ladder—I cannot help but think of a song from my childhood and youth. A song we sang in Sunday School and at church camps and retreats: “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Perhaps you know the song.

The first verse goes:

We are climbing Jacob’s ladder;  
we are climbing Jacob’s ladder;  
we are climbing Jacob’s ladder;  
soldiers of the cross.

Without the threefold repetition, the successive verses are:

“Every round goes higher, higher”  
“Sinner, do you love my Jesus?”  
“If you love him, why not serve him?”

And finally:

“We are climbing higher, higher.”<sup>1</sup>

While the song uses the imagery of Jacob’s ladder from Genesis, it is obviously about us climbing the ladder, not about the angels ascending and descending in Jacob’s dream. In fact, the song equates the image of Jacob’s ladder with the body of Christ, using the image of us as “soldiers of the cross.” Certainly not part of the Genesis imagery. So, I decided to do some research into the background of the song. It turns out this old familiar song is an African American spiritual that was composed sometime between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century by slaves taken from the area now known as Liberia. “Although lyrics vary from place to place and over time, they generally emphasize spiritual growth, increasing one’s knowledge about God, and a call to discipleship. The striving nature of this ‘climb’ toward God is depicted as a series of tests, and draws heavily on the New Testament tradition of the Christian as warrior—in this case, overcoming the slave-owner. The traditional lyrics hold out hope that the slave can rise up and escape slavery.”<sup>2</sup>

When you look at the backstory to our Old Testament reading for today, it is pretty easy to see why the slaves picked this story as the basis for one of their spirituals about rising up and escaping slavery. In some respects, Jacob is a kindred spirit, although for different reasons. Jacob, like the slaves, was seeking freedom, of sorts. As you may recall, Jacob had a twin

brother, Esau. Jacob was the younger of the two. The reason Jacob is out in the wilderness is that he is on the lam. Earlier, he had swindled Esau out of his inheritance. And then, to add insult to injury, Jacob conned their father, Isaac, into conferring his blessing on Jacob. The blessing traditionally reserved for the elder son. Esau was furious and sought to take revenge on his younger brother. Fearing for his life, Jacob fled in search of a new life. Just as the slaves dreamt of a new life free from slavery.

In our passage from Genesis, Jacob has a dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending. And then in the dream, the Lord comes to Jacob and reiterates the promise he had made to both Abraham and Isaac that they would be given the land of Canaan, that they would have many descendants, and that “the families of the earth shall be blessed in [Jacob] and [his] offspring” (Gen 28.14). The implication is that Jacob will find true freedom in the fulfillment of God’s promises. So, too, did the African American slaves find hope of their own freedom through God’s promises as symbolized by Jacob’s ladder.

Knowing the story of Jacob’s vision, the slaves would have undoubtedly found particular hope in God’s promise to Jacob: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (Gen 28.15). That’s huge! Jacob received assurance of God’s abiding presence even in the midst of his less than stellar performance: swindling his brother out of his inheritance, conning his father into giving him the blessing that should have been Esau’s, and then running away to avoid responsibility. That says something about God’s faithfulness to Jacob, despite his imperfections, despite his sinful actions.

Maybe that’s a good reminder for us, as well. Particularly during crazy and uncertain times. “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” That no matter who we are or where we are in our lives, God is always with us.

That is essentially what our second reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans is about. Paul talks about the dichotomy between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit. When Paul uses the term flesh, he is not so much talking about the physical, although that is certainly part of it. Even more so, when Paul talks about living according to the flesh, he is talking about living according to our human nature. A nature that is recognized as being imperfect and flawed. A nature that, from the creation of humanity, has been at times, contrary to, at odds with, God’s desires for us.

Even so, as Paul tells us, we have a choice. The realities of physical death aside, Paul tells us that we can choose to follow our natural inclinations, which are ultimately subject to futility and lead to metaphorical death, or we can embrace the Spirit, which leads to new life. As Paul tells us: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8.14). We have a choice: embrace the status quo or embrace a new life in God. Paul characterizes that life beautifully: “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8.15b-17a). When we turn to God we are welcomed and embraced as God’s own, being received in “a spirit of adoption” as God’s children. God’s own Spirit joins with our spirit, bearing witness, providing assurance, that we are indeed God’s beloved children. That we live in God and God lives in us. When we recognize that, when we remember that, it gives a whole

new meaning of the promise that God gave to Jacob: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” As God’s children, as God’s Spirit joined with our spirit, God being with us is not just some simple platitude. Rather, it is a statement of a central truth, integral to who we are. As Paul himself told the Athenians in the Acts of the Apostles: “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28a).

Paul goes on to talk about how this is an ongoing process. Recognizing that “the sufferings of the present time”—sufferings often caused by us not remembering that God is with us—often keep us from living more fully into what it means to be children of God. Of what it means to live in the Spirit. That this failure to remember creates a sense of futility. As imperfect human beings, this is the natural progression of our human lives—cycles of amnesia and accompanying futility, followed by remembering that God is indeed still with us and the accompanying sense of peace and joy that make life more bearable. But it is all a process building to the ultimate fulfillment of God’s kingdom. As Paul tells us, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8.22-23).

Paul’s use of birth imagery—groaning in labor pains—is undoubtedly intentional and designed to evoke a particular sense of who we are. That the excruciating pain of labor gives way to the indescribable joy of the birth of a child. That even in the midst of the futility of creation, even in the midst of uncertainties and doubts, we are in the process of being birthed into a new life with God. A new life that will be brought to fruition at the end of the ages, when God’s kingdom is complete, and we take our place as heirs to that kingdom, with the accompanying indescribable joy.

In some ways, the progression of the verses in the song “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” mirror Paul’s description of our progression in our lives of faith:

“We are climbing Jacob’s ladder”  
“Every round goes higher, higher”  
“Sinner, do you love my Jesus?”  
“If you love him, why not serve him?”  
“We are climbing higher, higher.”

This is a progression of desire to seek God, of our working to live into this by serving Christ who is God-made-man, and in so doing, continually coming closer and closer to who God has created us to be as his beloved children. If anything, maybe what is described in “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” is not so much a different way of looking at our seeking after God, but a natural progression of that process. One that is our response to having been adopted as God’s own. That when we are adopted into the family of God, we continue to seek ways to move ever closer to the one who loves us beyond measure.

Regardless of which image we use—the groaning of labor pains giving way to new life, or climbing a ladder to come ever closer to God—this is a process. For us imperfect humans, a life-long process. And there will be times when our natural inclinations will take over, when the

futility and uncertainty will overshadow the truth of who we truly are as those adopted by God, when the next rung of the ladder seems just out of reach. Particularly during those times—during times like we are living in right now—we need to remember God’s promise to Jacob: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” If we remember that and take it to heart, we will undoubtedly get to where we are headed and achieve our goal of living into the fullness of what and who God desires us to be.

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<sup>1</sup> “The United Methodist Hymnal #418,” Hymnary.org, July 15, 2020. <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/418>.

<sup>2</sup> “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” Wikipedia, March 6, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We\\_Are\\_Climbing\\_Jacob's\\_Ladder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Are_Climbing_Jacob's_Ladder).