

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home  
Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

The wearing of facemasks in public brings its own challenges. Preventing glasses from steaming up for example. And how are we to recognize one another in town or at the supermarket with our faces obscured? Today in our worship we hear again the story of Jacob and how he did not at first recognize the presence of God. After meeting God through a glorious revelation, Jacob realized that God was nearer than he first thought. Let us worship God together.

Hymn/song

Opening Prayer

Faithful God, we come seeking you, and discover you are already seeking us and ready to bless us with your love. You meet us in unexpected ways and in unexpected places. You meet us here and now. You surprise us with your tender grace. You watch over our coming and our going, our waking and our sleeping. You have made yourself fully known to us in Jesus Christ your Son our Saviour. Thank you for all your blessings. Open our hearts and our lives to make you welcome today. By your Holy Spirit help us to recognize your presence and your purposes. **Amen.**

Introduction to the Bible Reading

We find Jacob in a desert place. Jacob is separated from his loved ones. His father Isaac is dying. Jacob's relationship with his brother Esau is dying through deception and anger. His family is divided. Jacob – more of a sinner than a saint - is forced to leave home and family and finds himself on the run, in neither one place or another. The darkness is closing in. We can only imagine the strange flood of feelings in Jacob: the fear, the loneliness, the isolation and the regret. Can you identify with his situation, his emotions today? An encounter with God beckons. The light and glory of heaven pierce the darkness. We pick up the story in Genesis Chapter 28 beginning at verse 10.

Read Genesis Chapter 28 verses 10-22

Hymn/song

### Sermon

If life were a game of snakes and ladders then we have landed on far more snakes than ladders. We have lost a lot of ground because of Coronavirus. As a world, as a nation we have slipped behind in so many ways: in our health, in our employment, in our economy and in our community and family life. So many set backs can lead us to despair. If it feels like we are losing at the game of life, we desperately need a ladder, a step up. Today's Bible reading presents us with a ladder; Jacob's ladder.

Let us let his story speak to our story.

Jacob finds himself in a cold, dark and uncomfortable place.

Even his pillow is a stone. Now I like my pillow firm – but not that firm! How he slept I do not know – but he did and as he slept he had a most remarkable dream. He dreamt about a ladder.

A very useful item. Do you have a ladder in your home?

You might have a step ladder in your garage or shed.

We use a step ladder to change a lightbulb or reach for something from a cupboard. Or you may have a loft ladder to reach hidden treasures. Yes, at home or at work a ladder of any size is a very useful item to have available when you need it.

But the ladder in Jacob's dream was something else!

He dreamed that "A ladder – or a stairway - was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it". Can you imagine? Can you picture it? My strange sense of humour imagines one angel saying to the other "Hey, why take the stairs when we can fly?"

What did this strange dream mean for Jacob?

I have said that a ladder brings within our grasp something that is otherwise out of our reach. Likewise, in his dream Jacob's ladder brought the things of God and the things of heaven within his reach. Jacob did not go up this ladder but rather God came down beside Jacob. The gates of heaven opened up. What was always hidden is suddenly revealed for a moment. God came near. Jacob saw the Lord. He heard his voice. Heaven touched earth. Angel messengers formed a guard of honour for God who spoke words of revelation, words of blessing and words of promise to Jacob.

God promised Jacob a place, a family, a future ancestry that would be a channel of blessing for the whole world.

God said to Jacob: "I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go". I will bring you back. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised". Eventually the ladder was pulled back up into the loft of heaven. At sunrise, when Jacob woke up, he was convinced that wilderness place had become holy ground. His awakening was not just physical but spiritual. He was surprised by grace. "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it".

That morning Jacob took his stone pillow and set it up as a stone pillar. He named that place Bethel – meaning the house of God - and there he devoted his life to God.

What does this strange dream say to you and me in our situation?

What does it say to your deepest needs?

What does it say to your hopes and your fears?

What does it say to your past, your present and your future?

The dark night of Coronavirus is still upon us.

Like Jacob we are travellers between places.

We are in-between the old world and the new.

We've left behind what was our 'normal', but our 'new normal' is still on the horizon. Jacob was in a place that was not yet a place.

So are we. Our national life and our church are in a state of metamorphosis. Bethel, the house of God is re-locating to a new address. Coronavirus has changed us and we have not yet become what we shall become. It all seems like a dream – or a nightmare.

We can connect with Jacob.

With Jacob we need help to let go of what is past, what is lost and seek a vision of what is to come.

Like Jacob we need help to journey back from isolation to company.

Like Jacob you might not be thinking of God, but God is thinking of you. God has found you. God is above you and beside you.

God is speaking to you in the light of your day and in the dark of your night. He speaks his promise over you: "I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised".

Such is God's amazing love.

Like Jacob we can have this spiritual awakening, this new discovery which leads us to say:

"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it".

When we look back on 2020 will we say:

"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it"?

“I didn’t know it at the time, I couldn’t see it, God’s way was hidden, But now I see. How awesome. Even this is holy ground”.

How do we get to that place of revelation and understanding?

If we look at this story through the lens of the New Testament we find even greater insight and it just gets even more awesome.

We discover that Jesus Christ, God’s Son is the ladder.

He connects us to God. He is the ladder between heaven and earth. He is the ladder between life and death. He is the ladder between darkness and light. He is the ladder between sin and forgiveness. He is the way to heaven. He is the means by which heaven comes down to us and by which we can go to heaven.

Speaking about himself, in John chapter 1 verse 51 Jesus told the disciple Nathanael “Truly, I say to you, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1:51)

Jesus Christ is the ladder. He has come down as one of us and has entered into our fears, our troubles, our loneliness and our isolation. He reaches out to ‘bottom of the ladder’ people like us. He turns our sorrow to joy, our despair to hope, our darkness to light, our death into eternal life. His human life on earth showed it.

His human death on the cross – a wooden ladder – achieved it.

His empty tomb confirmed it. His living presence within us reveals it.

Now wherever we are we can say “Surely God is with me in this very place, in this new situation”. And we can put down a marker, a milestone. We can look forward and find new strength to take the next step. Just like Jacob. His life would take many twists and turns, with more ‘snakes’ than ‘ladders’. This included 20 years servitude as a shepherd for his uncle Laban who also tricked him into marrying a woman he didn’t love; a wrestling match with God where Jacob would get a new name Israel. Eventually Jacob was reconciled with his brother Esau and returned to Bethel and the promises of God were fulfilled. Life has its twists and turns. In our future, we’ll have to face difficult decisions and challenges; we’ll make mistakes but by God’s grace we shall learn from them.

There will be more dreams and visions, more messages from God to receive and pass on, more milestones to set up, more vows to make and keep, more sacrifices to make and more needs to serve.

As you take the next step, God says to you as he said to Jacob

“I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go.

I will bring you back. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised”.

So be of good courage. God's ladder will bring you to the finish line. He who has begun a good work in you will complete it at the day of Jesus Christ, to the glory of His name. Amen.

Hymn/song

### Prayers for Others

*Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw;  
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw,  
Gives exercise to faith and love,  
Brings every blessing from above.  
(William Cowper)*

Let us pray for the Church as we seek to follow where God is leading us. Let us pray for all ministers on the move or retiring. May they and their families know their Lord goes with them and ahead of them.

Give to all your people a vision of your glory and your love.

Lord of earth and heaven, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all leaders and those with responsibility.

For scientists and researchers developing a vaccine for all.

For teachers and all in education who enter a season of rest and renewal. For key workers and all who serve others.

Lord of earth and heaven, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all who find themselves in a hard, desert place.

For the sick and the sorrowing, the burdened and the lost, those who feel stuck on the bottom rung of life's ladder.

May they find God in their midst.

May they hear 'echoes of mercy and whispers of love'.

Lord of earth and heaven, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for ourselves and place into God's hands our needs, our families, our uncertainties, hopes and our dreams.

Reach down and lift us up we pray. Lead us with your hand.

Lord of earth and heaven, **hear our prayer.**

Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray

The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'

Hymn/song

## The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.

*Alleluia to Jesus who died on the tree,  
and has raised up a ladder of mercy for me!  
This ladder is long, it is strong and well-made,  
has stood hundreds of years and is not yet decayed;  
many millions have climbed it and reached Zion's hill;  
by faith many millions are climbing it still. (Harry Loper)*

May God the Father who leads you onward give you hope in your new beginnings. May God the Son who shares your experiences give you peace. May God the Holy Spirit who fires your faith give you strength for every task. **Amen.**

## Coffee Time Conversation

- Does/could God speak to you through your dreams?
- Where are your holy places where you connect with God?
- Where or when in your life have you exclaimed  
“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it”?  
Take time to give thanks to God.

## Suggested Hymns and Songs

### More Traditional Music:

#### **Blessed Assurance**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuyf1YQvcwY>

#### **Standing on the promises**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRibuWMg5BU>

#### **Be still for the presence of the Lord**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vep\\_Ty4Zx1o&list=RDVep\\_Ty4Zx1o&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vep_Ty4Zx1o&list=RDVep_Ty4Zx1o&start_radio=1)

#### **I the Lord of sea and sky**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6grXk3e5bs0>

More Contemporary Music:

**Open the eyes of my heart Lord**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9F4hP2AZAw>

**Our God is an awesome God**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38V8jnN1Kpw>

**Lord you have my heart**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIRPDwwO8mw>

Keep social distancing. Keep safe. Keep communicating.

Keep abiding in Christ.

God bless you and keep you until we meet again.

You are missed!

My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter