

Incan cultures. Ziggurats were sacred structures, massive temples reaching up into the heavens. People believed climbing a ziggurat brought you closer to God.

The book of Genesis mentions a ziggurat as part of an ancient tale that precedes the story of Jacob. The Tower of Babel was a ziggurat. The people built a massive tower so they could stroll upstairs whenever they wanted and hobnob with the Almighty. The problem was, God wasn't keen on the idea. The Lord blasted their audacious tower to smithereens and scattered the peoples of the earth. The Ziggurat of Babel is a cautionary tale: We are not to presume equality with God. The Lord is holy, and even a little dangerous, so we should keep a respectful distance. But now, as Jacob dreams of a ziggurat he sees the angels of God, not just ascending the ramp, but also descending, reaching out, meeting humanity. At Babel, God kept a distance. In Jacob's dream, heaven comes down to earth.

It's an extraordinary vision to be granted to a grifter on the run. Jacob knows he doesn't deserve any favors from God; but the amazing thing is that God blesses Jacob with the vision anyway. God decides it is time to reverse the curse of Babel, and Jacob is the person God chooses to reveal it to! Why does God do it? Why does God single out Jacob as the recipient of such a blessing?

One word describes it: "covenant." If there is one role the book of Genesis ascribes to the Almighty (other than Creator) it is that of covenant-keeper. God made a covenant with Jacob's grandparents, Abraham and Sarah that through them all the nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). It didn't matter how many twists or turns that covenant took as it worked its way down through the family tree. Jacob's sly manipulations and boneheaded shenanigans could not knock God's covenant off the rails.

Which is the awesome thing about covenants: it's not about what we do or don't do; it is all about what God does, and we *cannot* stop God's covenant from happening. When God makes the promise, God will keep the promise no matter what we do. Think of it this way: sometimes the covenant proceeds by means of a knight's move. If you're a chess player, you know that every piece moves in a straight line, up and down, across, or diagonally; except the knight, which moves two spaces forward, then one space to either side. It's very odd. The knight defies the logic of every other chess piece. It has its own way of moving.

So, too, with God's covenant. In the infinitely complex logic of God, it was undoubtedly part of the plan that Jacob would supplant Esau, gain the inheritance, and be the blessing. Jacob imagined it was all his idea, but God used Jacob's cunning to keep the covenant going. The descendants of this wily trickster, rather than the descendants of the stew-hungry hunter,

would be the ones to carry God's promise into the future. This is what Jacob realizes on that seminal night, with a stone for a pillow. Although he doesn't deserve it, God marked him, and God will use Jacob and his descendants for holy purposes.

Eventually, Jacob makes things right with Esau. When Esau and 400-armed men catch up with him, Jacob is sure that he's done for and Esau will cut him to pieces. So, Jacob goes to his brother, bowing low to the ground in a show of respect. But, instead of pulling out a sword and lopping off Jacob's head, "Esau ran to meet [Jacob] and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). Jacob offers his brother extravagant gifts, essentially giving back everything he stole, and then some. Esau spurns his brother's gifts, saying, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself" (Genesis 33:9). With that, the debt is forgiven. The rift is healed. The covenant is secured. God blessed both halves of the family. The fruits of the covenant are generous. There is more than enough for everyone.

In an epilogue to the story in Genesis 28, Jacob wakes from his dream and declares, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!" He was frightened to be so close to God, so he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17). The power of his dream hallowed the place. Jacob builds a little altar out of stones, pouring a vial of oil over them to sanctify the spot. It's a roadside shrine that will declare to anyone passing by that something of great spiritual significance happened there. He calls the place "Bethel." *Beth*, in Hebrew, means "house," and *El* is one of the ancient names for God. Beth-El, therefore, means "House of God." One of the stones Jacob piles up is that very same stone he used for a pillow, the stone upon which he had his vision of redemption and covenant renewal.

That stone was Jacob's benchmark. Before global positioning systems and laser-measurement devices, surveyors employed a benchmark, a bronze or aluminum plaque set into the ground by an earlier surveyor. Originally it contained a "bench" or groove on which the surveying equipment would rest. A benchmark indicates the precise place, down to a fraction of an inch, where a prior measurement was taken. A plus sign (or is it a cross?) marks the spot. A newly arrived crew of surveyors will set up their transit, the telescope-like device perched on a tripod, directly over the benchmark. A plumb bob hangs down from the transit, making sure the device is perpendicular, so the reading will be accurate. Only then can the new land measurement be taken. A benchmark, in other words, is a point of reference: solid, secure, and surviving.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, we have a similar point of reference. Our benchmark is called baptism. Whenever a Christian is baptized, it is as though we are dropping a benchmark down into the earth, securing it in concrete as the U.S. Geological Survey does. The Baptismal covenant represents the foundational agreement between an individual and God, symbolizing a commitment to follow Jesus Christ and live a new life of faith. At baptism, we promise to reject evil and profess our faith in God. We promise to bear one another's burdens and to bear witness to God's grace in the world. We take upon ourselves the name of Jesus and strive to keep his commandments. In return, God promises to forgive sins, bestow the Holy Spirit, and grant eternal life.

As Jacob assembled his little stone pile there at Bethel, he was doing much the same thing. Whenever his future path took him by that place again, he would seek out that stone monument, recalling that remarkable vision of angels ascending and descending, and remembering the power of God's blessing. Our lives are far removed from that network of sheep trails Jacob once followed, but we too are a covenant people. God forged that covenant with our spiritual ancestors and confirmed in the once-for-all blood sacrifice of Jesus. That new covenant symbolizes the surety of God's love for us, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of new and eternal life. That covenant calls us back to faithful living when we wander from the path.

It matters not if we are living lives that are less than godly, as was surely true for Jacob during his days on the lam. If we're truly honest with ourselves, we all have a little bit of swindler Jacob in us; but our spiritual benchmark provides a pathway back to faithfulness for Christ-followers who repent in their hearts. The baptismal covenant is still certain, still anchored like a bronze disk into bedrock. It's always there, *eternally* ready to serve as a point of reference, as we resolve to do and live better. Baptism is the reminder that redemption is assured and that covenant-renewal is possible because God is faithful.

Prayer: Faithful God, thank You for the truth of Your Word and Your never-failing promises both to Israel and the Church. Thank You for this glimpse into Jacob's dream in which he saw a stairway with heaven drawing near to earth. We thank You, too, for the blessed promise You gave him that all peoples of the earth would be blessed by his descendants and that You would not leave him or forsake him. May I be faithful in my service to You, my Creator and Redeemer, knowing that You will never leave me or forsake me. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

## Your Spiritual Benchmark

Sunday, July 26, 2026

Genesis 28:10-19a

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

A stone for a pillow doesn't sound like comfortable camping equipment; but when you're on the run, you can't be too picky. Jacob couldn't complain about his camping gear. Truth be told, he was lucky to be alive. Jacob's current situation was entirely of his own making. Jacob was born hanging onto the heel of his twin brother, Esau (Genesis 25:26). The name, Jacob, literally means "to follow" or "to seize by the heel." During his growing-up years, Jacob was painfully aware that he was number two among the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau beat Jacob into this world by mere minutes, but Esau was still the firstborn. Under the law, he stood to inherit everything.

Until Jacob intervened with a sly deal. Esau was an outdoorsy kind of guy: big and strong, good with a bow and arrow, but not too bright. Esau came back from hunting one day to find Jacob stirring a fragrant pot of lentil stew. "That stew sure smells good," said Esau. "Sorry, it's mine," said Jacob. "I've been cooking it all day; but I'm willing to sell it to you." Esau, being a few arrows short of a full quiver in the intelligence department, makes the worst deal of all time: he sells his inheritance to his brother for a bowl of stew.

Then, Jacob sealed the inheritance deal by putting on Esau's sheepskin coat and sitting down next to his father. Isaac, who was blind by then, reached out his hands, touched the sheepskin coat, assumed it was Esau, and gave *Jacob* his blessing! In those days, that was the equivalent of putting a will through probate. When Isaac died, Jacob got the estate. Esau was furious when he found out. He gathered his hunting buddies, and they took off in hot pursuit of that grifter, Jacob.

This is where we find Jacob in today's reading: out in the bush, living on the lam, one step ahead of his brother. The stone Jacob uses for a pillow symbolizes just how low he has fallen. He tosses and turns, trying in vain to get comfortable, listening for any rustling in the bushes that might indicate Esau and his buddies about to ambush him.

Jacob falls into a fitful sleep and dreams of "a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). We often refer to this as "Jacob's ladder," but some Bible scholars think it ought to be translated "Jacob's ziggurat." A ziggurat is a massive stone tower, cunningly constructed with a series of ascending ramps. Think of a squared-off pyramid, like those in Mayan or