

**Message: Committed to God****Have you heard God’s call?**

Frequently people have misconceptions about God’s call. Most assume it is a one-time declaration from God that, if they miss it, will send them spiraling through life without recourse. Let me assure you; that’s not the case. God’s initial call is to commit our life: to follow Jesus Christ. The rest of God’s call to the Christian will expand and develop as we grow in Christ. God doesn’t play “hide and seek” with his will. However, God does insist on “wait and see.”

In our instant gratification culture, this waiting is an enigma to those seeking God’s will. It is hard to wait and sometimes God has to take dramatic action to get our attention. This morning, we will see that God can speak in a variety of ways, times and places. God will use our gifts and abilities, personality and readiness to serve in ways that fulfill his promises to us while carrying out his divine purpose.

**When you heard God’s call, was it in a dream?**

Our Scripture passage for today, Genesis 28:10-19a, tells a famous story, the story of Jacob’s dream. We know it as Jacob’s ladder, but the ladder was God’s – the dream was Jacob’s. God revealed himself and showed Jacob the gate to heaven, the real stairway to heaven. Now we know the real inspiration for the Led Zepplin tune.

That part of the story is familiar. We all know it. As we look at the passage together this morning, I first want to step back and look at what was going on in Jacob’s life – that’s the context for Jacob’s experience. Second, we’ll look at what God said to Jacob. Finally, we’ll look at Jacob’s response and consider how it helps us in our own life.

To begin, we need to turn back to Genesis 25. Jacob and his brother Esau were already in conflict in Rebekah’s womb, leading to uncertainty and concern. Rebekah spoke to God about her concerns and received a rather cryptic message, a message filled with promise and concern, for two children who would be the founders of nations that would always be in conflict. That conflict grew because of the deceitfulness of Jacob and the careless irresponsibility of Esau until, in Genesis 27:41, we read, “*Now Esau hated Jacob...and Esau said to himself, ‘...I will kill my*

*brother Jacob.”* Rebekah was concerned for Jacob’s safety and asked him to go stay with his uncle Laban. Shortly afterward, Isaac met with Jacob and sent him to Haran to Laban to find a wife of faith. Isaac gave his blessing for the trip and asked God Almighty to bless Jacob. And so, as we begin our passage for today, the situation we find Jacob in is this: Jacob has left home for an indefinite period of time, traveling 500 miles from Beer-sheba in southern Canaan to Haran, a journey of up to two months on foot. His brother hates him and wants to kill him, his father knows Jacob deceived him and, even though he has the birthright and blessing, the future is uncertain.

### **Have you ever had a time of uncertainty in your life?**

We all do. In fact, I know some of you are facing uncertain times right now for a variety of reasons – health problems, financial challenges, and mental, emotional or physical challenges. We aren’t alone in our trials, either. Our family and friends - those who are the closest to us, usually play a part in the uncertainty of our lives. For some of us, family conflict may be the source of the cloudiness. Jacob’s back story is familiar ground.

Jacob is not an innocent victim in the situation, though. This isn’t a story about a victim of the system. Jacob is deceitful; his name means “deceiver” in Hebrew. He tricked his father Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing after he had taken Esau’s birthright. That means Jacob would not only be in charge of the family, he would own two-thirds of everything when, by rights, it should have gone to Esau. We don’t see any indication of prayer, worshipping God or any form of commitment to God in Jacob’s life to this point. Like most young people, he probably went along with whatever Mom and Dad did, passively participating in worship, rather than demonstrating an independent faith. Jacob was living a life that was out of step with God. Jacob needed a wake up call from God and that was what he was about to get.

### **Are you in step with God or are you out of step?**

Sadly, we can consider ourselves to be a Christian, give offering to the church and gifts to charity, participate in church services and ministry, even serve as leaders of the church and teachers, and still not have a personal relationship with God. Those who go through the motions

without a sincere, authentic relationship with God are not in step with God. John writes in Rev. 3:15-16, *“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold or hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”* Wishy-washy, partially committed Christians are out of step with God. A well known expression is this, “God uses pain to get our attention.” No matter whether pain is physical, emotional, mental or spiritual, God can use it to startle us out of our complacent, out of step lives, re-directing us to the path of life and light, the way of God.

That’s what happened to Jacob. Shortly after he left on his trip to Haran, Jacob stopped for the night. We know he didn’t have much with him because he used a rock for pillow – I would guess that’s a 200 on the sleep number scale! The Lord appeared in Jacob’s dream that night, revealing his presence above a stairway to heaven. The base was on earth and the top reached heaven. Angels, God’s messengers, were traveling up and down the stairway, doing the business of God. This is a very dramatic revelation of God!

Can you imagine it? The very gate of heaven is open and revealed. We see some of the powerful movers and shakers in the organization on their way to important, divine appointments. And to top it off, the tour guide is the one who built heaven, the owner-operator. This is far better than a personal tour of the White House by the President of the United States with introductions to the Chief of Staff and Cabinet. This is better than a guided tour of ANY earthly dwelling by any host, no matter how famous they might be. That’s because everything on earth is merely a dim reflection of the glory and majesty of heaven. No creature will ever be able to match the Creator’s beauty, majesty and presence. God’s presence is so great we fear him – that’s the awe we feel when we come into a holy place, a place where God is present and we know it.

### **How has God revealed himself to you?**

Do you feel God’s presence here and now? Have you felt God’s presence in church or at other places in your life? Jacob experienced God’s presence. He had no doubt. He knew he wasn’t just having a dream, but a supernatural experience. God revealed himself to Jacob in a dream at that place and time. For these ancient people, the location

where God was present had special meaning. They believed God was present only at a specific place for a specific purpose. The site of Jacob’s dream was that place, which he name Beth-el. “Beth” is the Hebrew word for house and “el” is a short form of God, so Beth-el means “house of God.”

We believe God is everywhere today. God is omnipresent – present everywhere, omniscient – all knowing, and prescient – all seeing. But there is more to it than God existing through the atoms and forces that make up the universe. God is present as a being, as one God in three persons, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We also believe that God is present in specific locations for specific purposes. Our experience of God is more intense and the Holy Spirit resonates more strongly within us when we are in a holy place, a place set apart for worship, prayer and praise of God. These are places God has blessed. Churches and other houses of God are certainly those kinds of places, consecrated and prepared for God’s purpose.

### **What makes a place holy?**

One thing: the presence of God. There is nothing we can do as humans to make a place holy, for only God is holy. Isaiah 6:3 tells us, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” A holy place is where we find our heart, mind and spirit responding to God’s presence. That’s why we want to whisper in cathedrals, speak with quiet voices in church or remain silent during sacraments and rites. Liturgical theology tells us that the way we worship shows what we believe; and what we believe dictates how we worship. Those places where we experience the majesty of God’s presence create in us a sense of awe and amazement. Awe is fear of the divine presence, for we are sensing the presence of God, who is far greater than we are. Amazement is due to the fact that we know we don’t deserve to be in God’s presence, yet he invites us there.

Holy places are physical places where tangible elements – the setting, music, words and gestures all come together with a meaning that is greater than the sum of the parts. Holy places are those places set apart by God where the visible and tangible connects to the invisible and intangible through the grace of God. Holy places are those places where

we go, prepared to receive God’s grace, where we are right with God in our heart, mind, body and spirit. Right now, this is a holy place.

### **What does God say to us when we are in a holy place?**

God spoke to Jacob in the dream and did two things. First, he repeated the blessing given to Abraham and Isaac, bestowing it on Jacob. God clearly identifies himself and he reminds Jacob what he has done for his ancestors and extends an invitation to follow in their footsteps. God repeats his promise of land, descendants who will fill the earth, and the mysterious promise that Abraham’s family will bring a blessing to many nations. God then adds specific words to assure Jacob of his presence and protection (v15). Jacob receives the comfort of knowing a God who says, “*I am with you....*” Jacob learns God is watching over him, “*...wherever you may go....*” And Jacob hears the guarantee he will return to the land of his inheritance. This clears up any worries Jacob has about the journey he is on, his destination and his future. Jacob is assured God is in control. It’s important to note what God did not promise Jacob. The Lord does not promise he will not suffer hardship. The Lord guarantees that no amount of difficulty or frustration will ever prevent the Lord from fulfilling his promises and carrying out his plans.

**What do you hear when God speaks to you?** Jacob’s experience of God fits our experience, doesn’t it? Words of comfort, watchfulness and restoration fit almost every situation. These are the words of spiritual assurance, for we are reminded of God’s promise from 2 Cor. 4:7-10b, “*...so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed....*” No matter what challenge you face today or at any time in the future, God is with us, watching over us, protecting and guiding us, even across the threshold of death to the eternal life that lies beyond.

### **How do you respond when you experience God?**

Jacob’s response is very direct. He wakes up early, takes the stone he used for a pillow and makes a pillar. Jacob then pours oil on the top of the stone, anointing it. In this way, Jacob is affirming his experience of God, marking the location as a holy place, naming it Beth-el, and

offering a sacrifice from what little he has to worship God. Jacob then makes a vow of commitment to God in vv20-22. This is what God wants: a sincere, committed relationship with those who follow him. It’s no coincidence God blesses Jacob by introducing him to Rachel, his future wife, after he arrives in Haran. God, the divine matchmaker, is at work again, fulfilling his promises giving us confidence in our faith. Jacob is newly committed to God, but he has to spend more than 14 years working for his uncle before he can marry Rachael and more years after that before he will be reconciled to Esau as a mature, faithful man of God. God worked through the circumstances of Jacob’s life to make him fit as the leader of the nation of Israel.

**What is your response to God’s presence in your life?**

Will you continue to worship and live the same way you always have? Or will you have a more authentic relationship to Christ? God loves you, but you have a responsibility to hold up your end by making a sincere commitment to Christ in all that you do. I encourage you to follow the example of Jacob. Rise early and spend time worshipping God in a holy place, feeding your spirit with God’s Word and being open to God’s voice through prayer each day. If you do nothing else as a follower of Jesus, read his Word and follow it each day. God gives us clear messages so we can make informed decisions on how to follow or serve him better. It is our relationship with Christ that enables us to bear lasting spiritual fruit.

I pray you will make a true, lifelong commitment to God today, moving beyond the choice to follow Jesus by opening yourself to God’s Word so you might be made into the image of Christ in all your thoughts, words and deeds.

**Genesis 28:10-19a (NRSV)**

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 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.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and 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.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel;

**Romans 8:12-25 (NRSV)**

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh - for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. 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 - if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 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. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.