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January 29th: Genesis 28 & John 15:1-17

January 28, 2020



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Jacob's Ladder. The vine and the branches.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis, chapter 28. Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.

God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham. Thus Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob, and sent him away to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he directed him, you must not take a wife from the Canaanite women, and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and

gone to Paddan Aram. So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaoth. Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran, and he came to a certain place and stayed there that 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 to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And behold the Lord stood above it 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. 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Behold, 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 awoke 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 early in the morning Jacob 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 the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.

And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you. Genesis chapter 28 occurs in the wake of the events of the previous chapter. Jacob, with the aid of his mother Rebekah, has deceived his father Isaac and received the blessing over his brother Esau.

Now he is summoned by his father again, he is blessed again, and then he is directed to go to Paddan Aram to take a daughter of Laban as his wife. Jacob continues to be associated primarily with his mother and his mother's side of the family. His mother had the prophecy concerning him and his brother that the older would serve the younger.

His mother is also the one who directed him in his actions up to the point when he deceived his father. His mother now and his father instruct him to take a wife from his maternal cousins. And this instruction is mirrored on the other side with Esau who takes a wife from his paternal cousins, the daughters of Ishmael.

By this Ishmael seems to want to improve relationships between him and his parents. Perhaps this is some sign of repentance on Esau's front, a sign of concern to win back his parents' favour. Jacob now retraces the path of Abraham back to Haran.

He ascends back to the land of the ancestors for refuge from his brother, who is trying to kill him, and also for a wife. Now we've already seen that Esau is associated with the colour red as Edom. He's the one who wants the red red stew and he's a skilful man of the hand.

But now Jacob is walking to the land of Mr White, Laban, the man associated with the colour white. And Laban's his uncle, he's a shrewd, crafty serpent type figure. And as he wrestles with these characters he will grow in his own abilities and character.

So he's overcome Mr Red and now he has to go to Mr White. And then he will have to meet Mr Red again in a new way. He is gaining wisdom and skill through experience here.

Now Jacob alights upon a particular place and he stays there that night because the sun has set. The setting of the sun is not an incidental detail in the story. Later on we'll see the sun rising at a key point in the narrative.

And it's important to pay attention to these scenic details because the Bible does not usually give us a lot of scenic details. It's not usually trying to build a picture within our minds of a very rich backdrop for its events. Rather it gives us very sparse details about how people appear, what time of the day things occurred at, all these sorts of details.

And then sometimes it will give us lots and lots and lots of details. And there seems to be a reason for this. These details are not accidental.

They're there to be reflected upon. When a few chapters later we see the sun rising we should be clued into the fact that there is a full cycle that has occurred here. That Jacob has spent a few chapters, as it were, symbolically in the dark.

And now his journey is complete. The sun has risen. It's been evening and it's been morning.

And now a new day in his life is starting. So what happens at this point is the beginning of a there and back again story. Jacob is leaving his home.

He'll be returning to his home a few chapters later. And during that time away he is undergoing a deep experience that will transform him. And that transforming experience will equip him to face the struggles that await him in the future.

As we move forward in this story we'll see a number of the ways in which the later part of the story mirrors the earlier part of the story. And fleshes out this there and back

again pattern. I won't get into that now but I do want us to pay attention to some of the details of this particular story.

Jacob takes up the stones of the place and he lays down to sleep. While he sleeps he dreams and sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending and God at the top. Now what might this remind us of? Earlier on, before the story of Abraham, in chapter 11, we read of the builders of Babel coming to a plain in the land of Shinar, settling there, gathering bricks and setting out to build a city and a tower whose top was in the heavens.

Jacob gathers stones as the Babel builders gathered bricks. Later he'll take a single stone that has been used as a pillow and then he'll set it up as a pillar. He marvels at what he sees when he sees this vision of the angels ascending and descending and calls the name of the place Bethel, meaning house of God.

And then goes on to describe it as the house of God and the gate of heaven. Now the Akkadian name for Babel means gate of God and so calling this particular place house of God and gate of heaven might remind us of Babel, the gate of God. So what are we to make of all these parallels and juxtapositions between the story of Babel and the story of Bethel? Well it seems to me something of Jacob's mission and the mission of the descendants of Jacob is being fleshed out here.

The Babel builders had sought to avoid being spread out over the earth, to gather together in this particular place to make a name great for themselves. God is declaring to Jacob that his descendants would be spread out to the four corners of the earth but then also be gathered into that particular place and that as they were gathered in that God would make his name great. This is something that contrasts with the story of Babel but also shows that God is going to fulfil what the Babel builders sought to fulfil but he's going to fulfil it in a different way and for his glory not for the building up of the names of proud men.

The name of the city is changed from Luz to Bethel. Luz is associated with the almond tree but also with crookedness. Later we'll see the almond tree mentioned as one of the trees with which Jacob outwitted Laban.

Bethel was an important site of worship in the early history of Israel and the Temple Mount has already been marked out in chapter 22 and now Bethel is marked out as well. There will be a tower formed between heaven and earth but it will be formed not by human technological genius and engineering but it will be formed by worship, by establishing this unhewn stone of worship, this pillar that goes up towards God's heavens. Jacob as we'll see in the chapters that follow is a man associated with stones.

There are a number of significant stones within Jacob's life and these stones contrast with the bricks of Babel but also with the brick that is associated with Laban's own name.

Later on in the instructions given to Israel they are told not to use bricks to build their altars but to use unhewn stones. And there seems to be something of this contrast that continues into the later life and worship of the nation.

So Israel is going to be established as the true Tower of Babel, the true point where heaven and earth meet in worship as God's angels descend to earth and interact with human beings and as human beings are raised up to God's presence in worship. This communication between heaven and earth is established by God himself. In the New Testament we can see this goes further.

Christ says to Nathanael, hereafter you'll see the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Christ is the true Tower of Babel, the true connection between heaven and earth. He is the one who sends down his spirit upon the church that by the spirit our prayers and our petitions and our lives might ascend to God's presence.

That is the true connection between heaven and earth. But here we have the great anticipation of what's about to happen. That God is going to fulfil the intent of Babel but in a different way, in a way that is founded upon his work.

And it's going to be through the descendants of Jacob. Some questions to reflect upon. There are similarities between this story and the story of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush.

Can you see any of them? And what help might they give us to interpret what's going on here? A second question. The name of Luz is changed to Bethel. On Jacob's return to the land another change of name occurs.

How might these two events shed light upon each other? John chapter 15 verses 1 to 17 Neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love

has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.

So that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. In John chapter 15 we encounter another one of the familiar sayings of Christ in which he identifies himself as the true something.

And also where he uses the expression I am. In speaking of himself as the true vine, Jesus identifies himself as the reality to which all other things point or anticipate or find the realisation of their fullness. In using the expression I am, Jesus is also once more hinting at his divinity.

The image of the vine was associated with Israel in places such as Isaiah chapter 5. The vine and the olive tree are both sacramental trees, one giving wine and the other giving oil. And I don't think it's accidental that Jesus speaks of himself as the true version of these things. Jesus is the true vine and as such the true root and source of Israel's identity.

As we look in the prophets we'll especially see this arboreal imagery, this language of trees and vines, plantings of the Lord etc. being used in a messianic context. Israel is the vine, the Messiah is the branch or the root, the one from whom a new Israel or Davidic dynasty will arise.

Christ, by identifying himself as the vine, gives us an image of the church as that which arises from him. But not just the church as that which arises from him but a new people of God, a people of God that takes on something of the character of Israel itself. The relationship between the father as the vine dresser and the son as the vine is interesting and it ties in with various other descriptions in the gospel.

People are committed to the son's care by the father and also removed from it in certain cases. The word that is translated prunes is also the word used for cleansed. So in verse 2 and verse 3 it's the same root word that's being used.

The pruning of the tree is the cleansing of the tree. We can think of the ways in which the cutting back of the tree and the cleansing of the tree might be associated by reflecting upon something like the circumcision of the vines. That this pruning of the vines in preparation for them to be fruitful and blessed is similar to what Christ is describing of the church here.

Israel as we see in places like Genesis chapter 17 had to be pruned in circumcision to be made fruitful as a vine for the Lord. It was a purging of the flesh in order that they would be suitable as a fruitful vine for the Lord. The disciples are cleansed by Jesus' word which stands for his broader revelation and message as we see in the chapter that proceeds.

The idea of removing branches from the tree of the people of God is similar to that found in something like Jeremiah chapter 5 verses 10-11. Go up through her vine rows and destroy but make not a full end. Strip away her branches for they are not the Lord's.

For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me declares the Lord. The branches are possibly cut off through persecution and this prunes also existing branches back for greater faithfulness and removes the branches that lack genuine life. The language and the image of mutual abiding is a word that is often used in John both in the gospel and in his epistles is powerfully illustrated by the organic union between the vine and the branches.

The vine gives the branches all of their life and the vine bears its fruit through them. Apart from the vine the branches die. And the vine imagery can be helpful for understanding works in the Christian life.

Works are presented not as something that we do to earn or to merit inclusion but as fruit, as an outflow of the life that we have been given. They are seen as blessing, harvest and gift rather than mere exercise of duty. We have no power to produce fruit apart from Jesus.

Fruit is produced as his life works itself out in our lives by his spirit and it's produced as we abide in him. And so it's by cleaving to Christ, by holding on strongly to Christ and abiding in him that we will produce fruit. And as we have seen the Father is also active on the vine to help it grow and produce much fruit as he acts as the vine dresser.

Every person of the Trinity is active within this picture. Looking through this passage we can see that bearing fruit is the point. We have been chosen, we have been set apart in order that we might bear fruit and that our fruit might make a difference, that our fruit might last.

It's not just some sort of salvation that's the point. Rather God wants to produce something new and good and beautiful and fruitful in the world through us. He wants the life of Christ, the life of the vine to be expressed through the branches and we are those branches.

Jesus' words must abide in us. The words of Jesus, the word who created all things, made flesh. They're not just regular words as we've already seen in this gospel.

They're spirit and life. They're the words of the Father. They're the words with the power to judge, the words with the power to raise the dead.

And these are the words that are supposed to abide in us. As these words abide in us then we will be able to pray in a new way. We're told that if we have Christ's words abiding in us then whatever we wish we can ask and it will be done for us.

As those words have their life within us and as we meditate upon those words, as those words feed us and give us our life and germinate within us, we'll find that they rise up in the form of efficacious prayer. The power that those words have in the mouth of Christ will be a power that they have in our lives and on our lips. Our bearing fruit is not some duty laid upon us but something which God delights and wills to accomplish through us.

Jesus died in order to produce much fruit and where does he want to produce that fruit? Through his people, through the branches. And this truth is one that we should meditate upon. It completely reframes our understanding of what works are.

If we keep Christ's commandments we will abide in his love. This reverses the earlier order that we saw in chapter 14 verse 15. There's a sort of circular character to be observed here.

A gracious cycle. As we love Jesus we will obey his commandments and as we obey his commandments we will grow and abide in his love. Our relationship to Jesus' commandments should be modelled after his relationship to his father's life-giving command.

We're doing what he has done and the commandments that Jesus gives us are liberating, empowering and life-giving. They're designed to give us fullness of joy. We shouldn't regard Jesus' commandments as a treadmill of rules and limitations and obligations but as the shape of an authorising vocation.

God wants to bear fruit through us and as we look to Christ and abide in Christ that fruit will come forth. His words will have their effect in us and they will produce something that lasts. This vocation takes the shape of loving and laying down our lives for each other as Christ did for us.

As we follow this vocation Christ will be powerfully at work within us to produce lasting fruit for his father. Christ declares of his disciples, you are my friends. It's the way that Abraham is described as the friend of God or as Moses is described speaking to God face to face.

It's a remarkable thing to be described as Christ's friend. The friend is someone who is not just a pal or a buddy. The friend is someone who enters into another's counsel.

We're not just servants doing Jesus' bidding from afar but those who take an active role in shaping things like the prophet in the heavenly council. Christ intercedes for us in heaven but as his words take root within us we can intercede, we can speak, we can act and work in the world with power and effectiveness for the kingdom of God. Friendship

also seems to be a particular emphasis within John's gospel where there are a lot of one-to-one interactions and where the cross itself is presented as precipitated by Jesus' healing of his friend.

Jesus lays down his life in large part on account of his love for his friend Lazarus and the relationship between the disciple who witnesses all of these things and Christ is also described in the form of friendship. The disciple Jesus loved. One question to reflect upon at the end of this.

In the epistles we'll see a number of ways in which there are reflections upon events and teachings within the gospels. You can see for instance in the book of James the way that it is exploring some of the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise much of the teaching of John's first epistle explores Jesus' farewell discourse and unpacks certain aspects of its meaning and teaching.

I want to encourage you to reflect upon the connections between this particular passage of John and the teaching of the first epistle. It's worth tracing the whole of the farewell discourse through and seeing where John is picking up the themes later on in his letter.