

The Big “If”
Preached by
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For Reflection: *“Life is the greatest bargain –we get it for nothing.”* Yiddish proverb

Hebrew Scripture: *Genesis 28:18-22*

¹⁸So 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. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰Then 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, ²¹so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.”

Epistle Reading: II Corinthians 9:8-12

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Meditation: *The Big "If"*

It would, no doubt, be helpful, if we did a brief review of how we found Jacob in the desert, sleeping and dreaming, building altars and making promises. Jacob, a second-born twin, was born grasping his brother Esau's heel. He first taunted Esau out of his inheritance—a brotherly swap of a bowl of beans for all he might inherit from their father. Precipitate to his run through the desert, Jacob, with his mother's help, fooled his father into giving him Esau's rightful and powerful first-born's blessing. Jacob ran for his life. He ran until he was exhausted, alone and tired. He fell into a restless, vulnerable sleep, a stone for a pillow.

So it was that Jacob dreamed. Jacob dreamed the dream we know as "climbing Jacob's ladder." Heavenly beings ascended and descended the ladder bringing the Word of God to Jacob in his sleep. He dreamed that he was still in God's care—that he was not beyond the promises of God. In fact, he dreamed God promised not just survival, but land and descendants and a return home—promises rivaling those God had made previously only to Abraham.

Jacob, liar, cheat and trickster, who knew himself for what he was, dared to believe that God had recognized in him something more. He knew that he had encountered the living Lord in this place and

that, for reasons of God's own, God had pinned the hopes of a people on a liar, trickster and cheat.

Having encountered God, Jacob made an altar of his pillow and gave it a name—Bethel—meaning “the house of God.”

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Then for the first time, this child in a family steeped in the promises of God, made his own vow. Being oh-so-human, it was a conditional vow, “If –If God does all these things, land, family and eventual return home in peace” and, still being Jacob, he slips in one more thing God hadn’t mentioned—wealth. If God threw in wealth, Jacob would be sure to give a portion of it back to God. If it all that happened, Jacob would dedicate this place to God. You gotta love it—that’s a very big “if” —Jacob has himself quite a contingency plan—a conditional altar and wheedling for a little more... How human.

Note, I said “human”—not Jacobean. It is very human in moments of crisis, even in moments of overwhelming awe, to make extraordinary promises to God: and the boldest of all—if God keeps God's promises; if God adds to the bounty I have already received...They don't sound like that at all, of course. They sound like this: if I get out of this; if it's not cancer; if my child lives and is healthy; if no one finds out; if I get this job; if I pass this test; if I get into this school; if I am ever a boss, parent, elected official, I will be better at it than anyone I've ever encountered: if I am ever... healthy, wealthy, wise... well, then I'll ... give more, do more, be more... We promise as though God hasn't heard our previous promises to be faithful, to follow Jesus and to give it our all in all. As though these repeated offerings are to be traded for new gifts... As though perhaps God's bounty would end if we didn't remind God what we wanted, what we needed, what we hoped for. As though we had never received anything from God at all.

Yet our God is a faithful God—faithful to all God's promises. Our God is a generous God who takes joy in our joy at God's bounty. And our God is a hopeful God who dares to believe that our renewed commitment might stick and we might indeed become the people God and we dream we can be—the people we were created to be. So, God embraces our many contingency plans as a new day for us—a new day with the one who is always doing a new thing.

And, of course, like Jacob, in the tedious details of our days, making a living and taking care of the house, tending to older parents and saving for college, working for good grades, so we can get into grad school, and in Jacob’s case, cheating his father-in-law and playing his wives off against one another, we forget. We forget who is the source of our blessings. We forget and think we did it on our own, we forget our promises, even when all God’s promises have come true, and even our conditional altars have faded in our memories.

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Some years ago, while at a conference, colleagues and I wandered through the neighborhoods around Baltimore's Inner Harbor. We came upon the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen. <https://www.google.com/search?q=cathedral+of+mary+our+queen+baltimore+md&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en-us&client=safari> It was an astounding edifice and its doors were open. We were discovered by the sexton, who finding a bunch of ignorant Protestants at his mercy, took us on a tour. It was the last cathedral built in this country before Vatican II. Its architecture was ancient and classic in style. In its subterranean spaces were the tombs of the church's servants, the inscriptions fading from Latin to English as time rolled on. The seat of the archdiocese, scepters, crooks, censers, candlesticks, bowls and plates were made of valuable metals and crusted with jewels. There were even vestments made of spun gold. The organ had seven thousand pipes in the front of the sanctuary and five thousand in the rear and could be made to answer (by a skilled organist—the sexton had opinions on this) . We came back to worship just to hear that organ. Nearby was a school and a closed convent, from whence the sisters used to come to teach in the school's classrooms.

Then he told us the story of how it came to be. Nearly a century ago now, there was a great fire in Baltimore. A merchant prayed to God and said that "If God saved his store, he would build God a church." The city burned in a circle around his store. Unlike Jacob, probably unlike most of us, the merchant knew he had a deal and set about keeping his promise to God. Instead of asking God to increase his bounty, he set about building not just a mere church, but a cathedral graced by the wealth God has bestowed on him. The merchant remembered and fulfilled his promise in real time.

Jacob, too, will eventually fulfill his promises—or at least we see God's promises fulfilled in him and through him, including the wealth he haggled for. But for Jacob, there would be a long delay of game. It is not until years later, when he finally decides to return home and face what may be his brother's still deadly wrath, that Jacob had a second religious experience—another dream in an unnamed place, where he wrestled with an angel. He finally remembered who had preserved his life and came home to who he was and who God called him to be. It is only then that Jacob became, not just the father of many children, not just a wealthy and powerful man, but one who reconciled with his family, ended the separation between himself and God and became a patriarch of the faith.

Two stories laid before us—inviting us to consider the promises we have made; the promises we have kept and the ones still waiting to be fulfilled. History shows our God is patient and graceful—seemingly accepting of our delays. Perhaps we might be a little more impatient with ourselves—as we often are with others and even with our God. For who knows what changes we might bring about, what hope we might bear, what difference we might make in our own day, if we dare to keep our promises now, present witness and future example for generations yet to be of the power of living in God's grace—simply by keeping the promises we have already made. It is perhaps a good question to ask ourselves on this day when we receive new members, hearing promises made and reminding us we have made those very same promises and still have them to keep.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Loving God: In summer, in winter, spring and fall, in life and death, and joy and grief, in all the changing seasons of our lives, we seek to draw nearer to You in prayer, even knowing that You are already with us.

Lord, we thank you for the little pleasures of our days—the unexpected letter, the welcoming smiles, the sun on our faces, butterflies and baby birds, a toddler's dandelion bouquet, sandy hugs on the beach, a shopping trip with a college-bound child, the best golf we've played all summer. For all these things we are deeply grateful.

And Lord, we ask Your comfort in the big and little bittersweet reminders that we are mortal and that the world You dream for us is not yet. When we forgetfully reach for someone who is not there -- because of death or divorce or illness or an argument at the dinner table -- even in the pained emptiness, let us know that You are there. When we rage at a body that doesn't do what we want, or grieve a mind that doesn't know who we are, or are disappointed with a lower grade than we are accustomed to, or a loved one who didn't do what we hoped, touch our wounds Lord. Soothe us with the assurance that You love each one of us as we are. and give us the power to do the same.

For safe streets and the freedom to sleep without fear, we give You thanks. May we wake with renewed energy to work so that every child and every adult may know the blessings of these simple gifts, free from war and violence inside our homes and out.

In all these joys and griefs of our lives, let us discover not isolation but community. By Your Spirit, help us to deepen our connection with you and with the community of your people and all people. We pray with these words and with the words your Son taught us to pray, saying...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.