

Building FOR the Kingdom

24th Weekend in Kingdomtide – October 29/30, 2005

Sermon Background Study

[In a dream, Jacob sees a stairway to the heavens and God standing beside him. After God extends the covenant to Jacob, the stunned man awakens, consecrates the place, and vows to tithe.]

Genesis 28:16-22 (NRSV)

¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷And 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.”

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.”

[Isaiah speaks of what it really means to worship God, to build *for* the kingdom of God.]

Isaiah 58:6-9a (NIV)

⁶“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

We can think of St. Andrew as a colony of God’s kingdom, placed here so that we can make disciples of Jesus Christ and meet the needs of others. We can’t build the kingdom of God, that is God’s work. But we can build for the kingdom. And that is exactly what we at St. Andrew are committed to doing to the best of our abilities and in the power of God’s Spirit.

Running away

I doubt that John Newton had Jacob in mind when he wrote “Amazing Grace.” Some of us may even think that grace is largely limited to the New Testament. But this story is all about God’s grace, the fact that God would be present with Jacob, this deceitful and unworthy man. But that is what makes grace amazing, puzzling, perhaps even infuriating at times.

After trying to have children for nearly twenty years, God had finally answered Isaac’s and Rebekah’s prayers. She became pregnant with twins. It was a trying pregnancy that forebode great difficulties for the family. Esau was the older of the twins and Jacob the younger. Esau was the “field and stream” type, while Jacob was more “hearth and home.” Esau was his father’s favorite. Jacob was the apple of Rebekah’s eye. The rivalry between the brothers that had begun in the womb only escalated as they grew

The Law and Tithing

Most of the biblical witness about tithing is found in the books of the Law: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is easy to get pretty confused with all the instructions and regulations about tithing. It is also easy to end up seeing the whole thing as an exercise in legalism, rather than, as was Jacob’s, a grateful and freely-given response to God’s grace.

Yet, we can step back from the tithing “regulations” in the OT and see several functions of the tithes. First, the tithes were to be used to build community, as the people were to gather together and share grain and animals offered up as tithes. Second, the tithes were to be used to support the Levite priests who were forbidden to own land and, thus, lacked an independent source of income. The priests were to present to the Lord a tithe of the tithes they were given. Third, the tithes were to be used to support the needy. They were to be shared with travelers, orphans, widows, and those who did not own land themselves.

Though the Pharisees paid their tithe, as Jesus would have, he took them to task for their cold-hearted calculation of what was owed. They had lost sight of what God had tried to teach them about the use of the tithe: community, worship, and compassion.

older. Once, Esau had exchanged his birthright as the oldest son for a bowl of stew that Jacob had prepared. Esau had even sworn an oath on it, and such an oath could never be undone. From there, things only got worse. When the elderly Isaac prepared to give his blessing to Esau, Rebekah and Jacob connived to trick the old man and steal the blessing for Jacob. Not surprisingly, Esau was terribly angry at this thievery perpetrated on him by his own mother and brother. Rebekah decided that Jacob must leave and head northward to escape Esau's wrath. So, ostensibly in search of a wife, Jacob fled.¹

When Jacob is about sixty miles from home, he stops for the night and has the most remarkable dream.² First, Jacob sees a stairway (this is "Jacob's ladder") filled with angels making their way to and from the heavens. Second, Jacob realizes that God is standing next to him! There is nothing about Jacob's life or character that would make him worthy, at least in our eyes, of such a visit. Up to this point, the only time Jacob has even uttered God's name was when he used it in a lie as he tricked his father. Yet, God has come to Jacob. And God extends to Jacob the remarkable promises that God had made to Abraham and to his son, Isaac. Now, the covenant will pass to the treacherous Jacob. The land will be Jacob's. His offspring will be countless. All the families on the earth will be blessed in Jacob and his family. What promises! So over the top. The covenant must pass from Isaac to a son – but to Jacob!?

The response of the exiled

When Jacob awakens, what is his response to this remarkable encounter with God? First, he is awestruck. Who wouldn't be! I imagine that he fell on his knees, emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed by what had happened. But he didn't stop with what he had experienced and felt and heard. Jacob worshiped God. Jacob took the stone which he had used as a pillow while he slept and anointed it, setting it apart for God. In other words, Jacob consecrated the stone. He then made promises of his own, including a vow to give back to God one-tenth of all that God would give him – which would, of course, be one-tenth of everything that Jacob would ever have, as all things are a gift from God.

Surely, Jacob cherished God's words in his head and in his heart. But he went the next step. He also cherished God's visit with his hands, taking the concrete step to set aside for God's use a portion of all that he would ever have. Jacob understood that this was the only appropriate response to God's grace. God had not asked this of Jacob. Jacob was not being obedient, he was being loving and grateful. How can we be any less grateful? But for what use should we put the tithe to work?

Isaiah and the Kingdom

Today's passage from Isaiah is from so-called "Second Isaiah," chapters 40-66, written during the time of the Babylonian exile when it seemed to the Jews that all was lost and they had been abandoned by God. The prophet brings to God's people remarkable word-pictures of the time when God's people would be brought back from exile and God's kingdom established.

The Jews understood that the establishment of God's kingdom would be God's work. Only God could accomplish the work of new creating that would be needed to restore the cosmos and all humanity. If all the nations were to see Israel's vindication and glory (Isaiah 62:2), it would be God's doing and God's alone. Yet, God's people were not without work of their own. Though God would build the kingdom, the people were to build *for* the kingdom, doing all that they could to make this world reflect the coming kingdom. They were to share their food with the hungry, shelter the poor, clothe the naked, free the oppressed. They were to let the light of God shine through them like the dawn – brilliant and beautiful.

This is still the work that God gives us today. St. Andrew is to be a light – sharing, feeding, clothing. We are to build community, to make disciples, to invite people into relationship with God and one another. The work of St. Andrew proceeds on seemingly countless fronts. One need only check the calendar here for a typical week to sense the amazing work being done to help, to console, to teach, to feed . . . *to love*.

¹This amounts to exile for Jacob. He will spend twenty years away from home. There is no mention of Rebekah ever seeing her beloved son again. I doubt she ever thought through the consequences of her deception. Of course, while she was pregnant God had told her that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Nonetheless, her treachery was wrong and was certainly not undertaken out of love for Isaac or Esau.

²In the OT dreams are often a special means of communication from God. The dreams are solely God's initiative as the person is sleeping. When the dreamer awakens, he or she knows that God has visited. These are always pivotal moments in Scripture, often overflowing with theological significance.

Daily Bible Readings

(more about Jacob and about tithing)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 27:1-40 Jacob and his mother conspire to steal the blessing that Isaac intends for Esau.</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 27:41 – 28:22 Jacob flees from Esau's fury and encounters God.</p>
<p>Day 3 Genesis 29:1 – 30:24 Jacob's marriages and sons</p>	<p>Day 4 Deuteronomy 14:22-29 The tithe to be used for community and celebration of the LORD.</p>
<p>Day 5 Malachi 3:6-12 An accusation concerning tithes. By withholding their tithes, the people are robbing God!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

