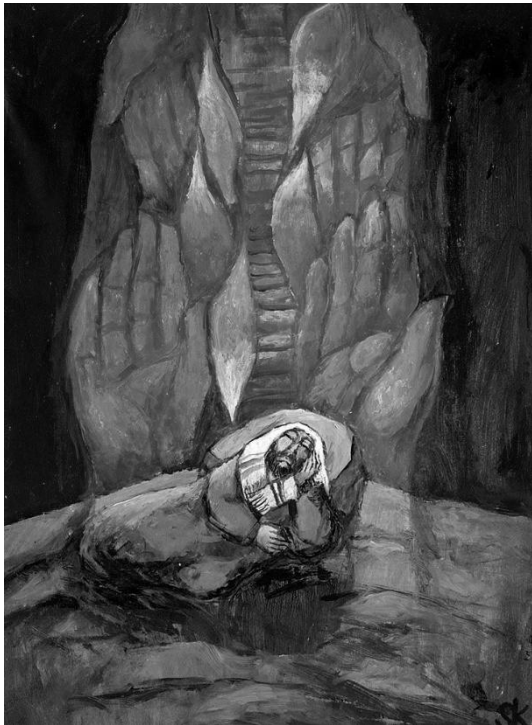


14 th Sunday after Trinity Holy Places

10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. **11** When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set.



Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. **12** He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13** There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. **14** Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. **15** I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I

will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” **16** When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” **17** He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” **18** Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. **19** He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. **20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear **21** so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God **22** and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

Jacob was a shrewd man and he knew what he wanted. Through a cunning scheme, he stole his brother's birthright. Then he managed to obtain his blind father's blessing by pretending to be his brother Esau. And yet, Jacob had miscalculated. He hadn't anticipated the anger and hatred of his brother, Esau. Therefore, he had to flee in a hurry, carrying only a few belongings his mother had packed for him. Exhausted and at the end of his strength, he arrived at a desolate place. He had fought for the first position, but in the end, he had lost everything. Without family, without parents, and without a homeland, he lay down to sleep. The only thing that offered him any comfort was a stone for a pillow. The amazing thing about this story is that Jacob was indeed chosen by God himself as the patriarch. Jacob was given the first born rite. All the deceit and cunning were entirely unnecessary. God had revealed to Rebekah long before that the older Esau would serve the younger Jacob. And yet, Jakob tried to hasten this blessing with his

plans. The outcome of the story was unbearable hatred and the separation of the two brothers. Jacob had to flee so that his brother wouldn't kill him. Many of you have experienced exactly what Jacob went through. You had to leave your family and your homeland. Some of us had to do this recently, while for others, the experience of fleeing is long in the past, yet the memories remain. The long journeys that had to be made on foot. And the exhaustion that is so overwhelming that one can sleep soundly even on a hard stone. I myself never had to flee from my homeland or my parents. Nevertheless, I can also understand very well what it means to flee. Because we have also experienced the feeling of having to flee in many other ways, and we still experience it to this day. For some, it is work that has become too overwhelming; for others, a conflict within the family. It's even possible that I become so entangled in my own thoughts that I can't escape them at all, and all I want is to simply run away. And yet, it's impossible for us humans to simply leave everything behind. Our history, our thoughts, and our experiences always come with us as baggage. And these very things we carry with us from the past can make the pain of being far from home all the more intense. Jacob, lying on his stone pillow, still had vivid memories of his bed at home, as well as the love of his mother and father. He even missed his brother, who had become so hostile towards him, and he suffered because of it. This is how everyone feels who is far from home. Some miss the delicious Ghormeh Sabzi meal or being with their closest family members. But these experiences are all just memories. The harsh reality of the present, far from home, is all the more painful when I think about the past. Jacob must have felt the same way as he slept on his stone pillow. Perhaps he didn't just fall into a deep sleep out of tiredness. Perhaps it was also due to deep depression. But during this deep sleep, something very special was about to happen.

Because the story we encounter in the Bible today is not just a typical story of flight, as many of us are already familiar with. This story is, in fact, an encounter with God. In verse 11, it is repeated three times that Jacob had come to a **certain place**. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that this place was significant because Jacob encountered God there. And God designated the land where Jacob lay during his flight as a land of blessing for him and his descendants. Then Jacob got up and said, "Surely, the Lord is in this place!" In ancient times, people believed that God could be found in a specific place. The Greeks believed that there was a place where heaven and earth were connected. The Jews believed that Jerusalem was that place. Even today, people sometimes look for God in a particular place. One boy once came to church with this very question, suggesting that God might be hiding somewhere under a pew. Jacob saw the angels of God ascending and descending, and therefore he declared the stone on which he had lain to be a holy place. In the New Testament, Jesus refers to this very story. In the Gospel of John, it is recorded that Nathanael came to Jesus, and Jesus praised him as a righteous man. Then Nathanael confessed his faith in Jesus, saying, "You are truly the Son of God!" Based on this confession, Jesus refers to the story of

Jacob's ladder and says, "You will see heaven open, and the Son of Man descending and ascending to heaven." The story of Jacob's ladder is a small indication that God can indeed be found in our world. Even—and perhaps especially—when the familiar ground is swept away from under our feet, and we have to live as strangers in a foreign land. The story of Jacob's ladder is meant to show us that God is there and is with us. Through Jesus Christ, this Bethel, or house of God, has been revealed. Not in a place, but in a person: in Jesus Christ. For he himself said, "No one comes to the Father except through me!" In the title of this sermon, we see an illustration of our sermon text for today. The image was painted by Sieger Köder and, in a curious way, instead of angels, it shows the hand of God, ascending and descending. This makes it clear that not only angels ascend and descend, but that God himself, with his right hand, is behind Jacob's destiny. This impressive image clearly shows a ladder leading from a small stone on earth all the way up to heaven. And at the very top sits God himself! Holding everything under his blessed hand. And God himself speaks to Jacob and says:

“And behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”

Dear friends, we all have experiences of being on the run. Being separated from family and home is just one thing. Feeling abandoned by God himself is surely the worst thing imaginable. And that is why God keeps sending us this ladder from heaven, which connects us with the living God. Most of the time, we are completely unaware of this ladder. And yet, it is there! And we need it so desperately. Even if we are not currently on the run, our entire life is always a journey. With or without scientific knowledge, it is becoming increasingly clear that our world, as we know it, has a limited lifespan. And especially in this situation, we desperately need to see God and his blessed right hand over our lives. God must open our blind eyes and show us that there is more to life than the hard stone of our sorrows and troubles. He must show us that we have a future. This connection to God is absolutely crucial! Here is an analogy: When we were still in our mother's womb, we were very closely connected to our mother through the umbilical cord. Through this umbilical cord, we received our nourishment. None of us, in the safe environment of the womb, had any idea who this mother was. We only had the umbilical cord that connected us to the mother. And then, as everyone knows, during birth we are forcibly ripped from our mother's womb, and the umbilical cord, to which we had become so accustomed, must be cut. Yes, the birth of a human being is a very violent transition from the safety of the womb into a harsh world. But, miracle of miracles, after birth, something new emerged. We could find refuge in our mother's arms. We could feel her breath, smell her skin, and touch her. And even more: we could suddenly breathe, eat, and live independently. And yet, this life, too, will have an end. At some point, the physical shell of our body, in which we live, will also be forcibly torn away.

For God, life is not over then. It only begins! He gives us a ladder to heaven that connects us with God. In the womb, the umbilical cord connected us to our mother. On earth, God has connected us with Jesus. Even when we cannot see him, he is with us. Yes, from our broken bodies, we can see all the way to heaven through Jesus! God gave Jacob such a ladder to heaven. And he gives it to us as well. Just as the umbilical cord connected us to our mother, providing nourishment and life in the womb, so the body of our Lord Jesus connects us to life now. Jesus himself is the umbilical cord and the ladder to heaven, reaching from this life all the way to eternity. His death and resurrection are what open our eyes, allowing us to marvel that God is with us even in the deepest distress, even when our bodies break down. Because the connection that God establishes can never be broken. Jacob got up that morning and called the place where he saw the ladder to heaven, Bethel. Translated, it means "House of God." Oh, how desperately we humans need such a house of God in our broken lives! And we must never forget: A house of God is a house of God because God is there. Without God, there is no house of God. We don't need holy places where people say: "Here is God," or "There is God!" No, even though God is present everywhere, he reveals himself to us only where he says he will! Namely, through Jesus and through his word! We need a place where God is present! We need a place where Jesus stands before us with open arms and assures us of what is truly important: "Here you are at home!" "Here I am completely for you!" And these words apply to you. Whether you are running away, whether you want to escape your entire life, or whether you are taking your last breaths. And especially in places where people no longer believe that the world will last very long... God is your home. There is nothing better than that. Amen.