

"Never Alone"

Sterling UMC
July 17, 2011
Genesis 28:10-22

Have you ever felt alone? Really alone? At one time or another all of us have probably known what it was like to feel alone. Maybe it was a time:

- you moved to a new community or job
- while in a hospital waiting room (or emergency room)
- you were excluded from something your friends were doing
- after a death or broken relationship
- you were in a big crowd but felt invisible and unnoticed

Most of us have had times like this in our lives. And I don't know anyone who likes them. Even many of today's "advances" meant to make our lives easier create loneliness.

In this age of Communication. We can send e-mail quickly around the world. We can visit with someone in another country on Facebook. We can see world events in our living room. But our interpersonal contact has diminished. We are spending our time with impersonal machines rather than people.

It is surprising to think that the book of Genesis could possibly have something to say to our world. But loneliness is not new. It is not true that "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world". What is true is that people who need people are the ONLY people in the world.

In our text this morning we find Jacob a very lonely man. The great plot to receive the blessing from Isaac was a great success . . . in one sense. However, in another sense it was a terrible failure. Jacob was forced to leave home to escape being killed by his furious brother. So, Jacob gets the blessing but he has to leave the inheritance with his brother.

Jacob is sent to his uncle's home to find a wife. The journey to Haran was a long one. When he was about 70 miles from home he reached what is now known as Bethel. It is surprising that we find Jacob outside the city apparently sleeping in the wilderness. It was common practice that visitors in a city would be extended hospitality for the night. So . . . either Jacob arrived after the gates were closed, or he was so depressed that he didn't want to be sociable.

It is hard to imagine what was in Jacob's head that night. Was he filled with regret over his actions toward Esau? Was he mad at his mother, his brother, or his father? Was he feeling sorry for himself? Did he feel that God had deserted Him? We don't know, but any or all of those things are possible.

If you have ever experienced such a time of life then you will gain something positive from this experience of Jacob's.

While sleeping Jacob has a dream. This was a unique dream because immediately Jacob knew that God was communicating to him. I don't know about you, but most of my dreams leave me shaking my head. I have no idea how such wacky things get into my head. This was not a typical dream. It was a message from God. Jacob saw a ladder or stairway that went from the earth to Heaven. On the stairway angels were going up and down. At the top of the ladder the Lord stood. In this dramatic experience God sends Jacob several messages:

He is here. In his state of depression and loneliness it might have seemed that he had literally left the presence and protection of God Almighty. But God reminds Jacob that He is present. In theological terms we could say that God affirms His "omnipresence." He is present everywhere. We are never outside of His domain. David understood this when he wrote Psalm 139,

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (7-10)

Jesus told his disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the earth." The message is simple. You may "feel" alone, but you are NOT alone. We must rely on truth and not feelings in the lonely times.

He is working. The Lord tells Jacob that...

"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. . . .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 promised."

Jacob may have felt that God had forgotten Him. But God is still at work. Jacob doesn't see it but God is molding Jacob's character. He is preparing him, even in the wilderness, for the work He has for him to do.

The ladder has angels going up and down. The thought is that the angels going up were bringing the needs and requests of the people to the Father. The angels coming down were bringing God's answers and provision. God is not absent . . . He is involved and at work in your life. If you are a child of God, you can be certain that He has not forgotten you. He has told us that He will "never leave us or forsake us." Just because we don't see what He is doing, doesn't mean he isn't doing anything.

He is Committed to Us. God tells Jacob that He will be with Him until He fulfills His promise to Him. Do you understand how incredible this is? Jacob has acted the part of a

scoundrel. He has lied and deceived his father and brother and now was being chased from his home. And in this setting, under these circumstances, God still says, "Hey, I'm going to see this through with you." Paul wrote "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

It's possible that you feel all alone because you have failed. You have done foolish things and believe that you don't deserve any friends. Truth is . . . that may be true. You certainly don't deserve to be loved by God. And neither do I. But the message is simple, God is committed to you even though you may be weak in your commitment to Him.

There is a Way to God. There is a ladder going from earth to Heaven. God is accessible. But the question we must ask is: what does the ladder represent? Good works? Church membership? Baptism? Great experiences? The Bible tells us that the ladder is Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the Father except through me."

Quite frankly, the reason you feel so lonely may be because you have not come to God in the right way. God has provided a bridge, a ladder for you. Jesus became our "stairway to heaven" when He took our place and died for our sin. The Bible tells us that we must place our hope and confidence in Him in order to become part of God's family. We can only get to Heaven by using this stairway.

I'm sure Jacob didn't understand this at the time of his vision but I think the message was there for you and me to understand now. So, here's the key question: Have you taken the stairway to Heaven? Have you placed your trust in the one who died for your sin? If you haven't, the first step toward dealing with your loneliness is to trust the Savior.

JACOB'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S PROMISE

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 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." (Gen. 28:16-17)

The first thing we see is that Jacob is strengthened. His eyes are opened. He realizes that he is not alone after all.

Do you really understand what a blessing it is to have God at our side? We pass it off as nice sentiment but don't understand the profound blessing it is. Do you realize that God is far superior to any friend you could hope to have?

- He will never leave you like some of your friends will
- He will always listen even when your friends are too busy for you
- He will never bring up the past (if you have confessed it)

- He will always know what to do
- His guidance will always be appropriate
- He will love you even when you don't act the way He wants you to.

There is no human friendship that can come close to what God offers us. Paul understood this. He said, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Don't miss the message. If we have the Lord, everything else is decoration. If we have everything BUT the Lord, we have nothing. Jesus is the friend that can and will supply your need. Other people are nice, but what you really need, you have, in Christ.

Jacob worships. We read that Jacob was afraid. He said "this is none other than the house of God." This is not a fear that comes from threat, it is a fear that comes from respect it is a fear that comes from awe. This is a common reaction in the Bible. Over and over again someone has an encounter with God and they are overwhelmed.

- Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:6)
- Isaiah confesses that he is "undone" (Isaiah 6)
- When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water (Matthew 14)
- At the mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:6)

Jacob realizes that He is on Holy Ground. When you are on holy ground you become aware of your sin. Jacob knows he deserves nothing from God's hand. But God has, in His mercy, given Him life. In response to this blessing he sets up a monument from the stone he used as a pillar and uses the stone as a reminder of His encounter with God. That stone became a pillar of grace. It served as a reminder that God has not given to us as we deserve . . . He has instead given us His mercy and His love. When we realize this we bow in worship.

He vows to serve God.

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 so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God 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."

The point is clear: If we understand God's promise to us and receive it . . . we should be led to serve Him with our lives.

- Jacob understood the blessing was more than he deserved
- He understood that the blessing was staggering in it's scope
- He understood that a love like this can never be repaid.

Jacob knew that in response to God's love, He should give His love and devotion in return. He would worship Him. He would acknowledge him with a tithe of his income. He would honor Him with His life. I hope the message is clear. We can do no less. The God

who comes to us in our loneliness deserves the best we have to give in return.

So, for those of you who understand loneliness I remind you that you are not really alone. You may not see Him. You may not feel Him. But He is present.

Will you receive His love? Will you take advantage of the stairway to Heaven that He has provided? Will you trust Him today?

If you have trusted Christ . . . if you have taken the stairway to Heaven, then I have other questions for you:

- Will you believe Him? Will you believe Him when He tells you that He is with you, and working (even now) in you? And will you believe Him when He tells you that He will never let you go?
- Do you appreciate the value of His love? Are you looking beyond Him in the foolish thought that you can do better? Will you rest in the arms of your beloved Savior?

I encourage you this week to erect your own monument to the Lord to remind you of your best friend. It doesn't have to be a granite statue in your back yard.

- Maybe you could put a rock on your desk or your coffee table to remind you that you are in the presence of the Lord.
- Maybe you could put a poster up with a Bible Verse like Romans 8:38. 39

"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

- Maybe you could put a post-it note on your mirror that says simply "You Never Walk Alone"
- Maybe you could find a little ladder and put it in a prominent spot to remind you of the one who has opened the way to Heaven.

Do something that will remind you that you are in the presence of the Lord. I hope that you will always have friends around you. I hope they are good friends . . . the kind that care, and love, and support you. But even if you don't . . . I hope you'll remember that because of your faith in Jesus Christ, you will never walk alone.