

Sermon Draft for April 2, 2025, Lenten Midweek 5
The Good News of a Savior Who Unites Heaven and Earth
Text: Genesis 28:10–22

God created man to live in paradise, in perfect fellowship with him. And it was very good. By our sin we fractured the fellowship between God and man and we were expelled from the paradise of Eden.

The result is that, since the Fall, we have been missing the goodness that God created for us to enjoy. That has left us longing for something we were designed to have but now are missing. In his Confessions, St. Augustine once described that longing by saying that “our hearts are restless.”

Seeking to regain what was lost, we keep trying to make a way back to paradise. Eastern religions and some Christians try, by meditation or mysticism, to ascend to the divine realm in their minds. More commonly, we try building towers of good works, thinking that by them we can make our way to heaven.

No matter how hard we try, though, those efforts are in vain. What separates us from God and his glory is our sin and nothing we do can free us of that sin. No attempts at self-enlightenment can erase what we in fact have done, said and thought. No good works can cancel them out. The answer does not lie within us, it is not something we can work out. As long we rely on our own efforts to reach God, we remain exiled from paradise. As long as we try to make our own peace, our hearts remain restless.

That is exactly the situation Jacob found himself in at the beginning of our Old Testament Reading, our fifth midweek text from Genesis. Jacob was an exile with a restless heart.

Jacob had managed to obtain the birthright and blessing that ordinarily would have gone to his older brother, Esau. But he had obtained them by manipulating Esau and deceiving his father, Isaac. When Jacob had then learned that Esau was planning to kill him in revenge, he'd fled for his life.

The plan was that he would travel far away to the hometown and relatives of his mother, Rebekah. He would come back if and when his brother's anger had died down.

Jacob had been pursuing blessings on his own terms. But it wasn't exactly making his life a paradise. In fact, as he now fled in search of safety, it meant leaving behind the Promised Land, which was part of the blessing he had sought.

The name Jacob means "deceiver" and Jacob was finding out that deception and self-promotion can be tiring work. They do not calm a restless heart, and they cannot pry open the door to paradise.

As Jacob traveled, night fell, and he lay down to sleep, using a rock for a pillow. ***"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’” (vs. 12–15).

When Jacob had sought blessing on his own, the results had been conflict, fear, and flight. Instead of bringing him peace, it had sent him packing. But now he saw God coming to him and freely blessing him. The blessings he had sought by cunning were now being given to him as a free gift from the Lord. What he had tried to reach out and grab for himself was now being given him by grace.

Because the Lord had come to him, the one who had been restlessly running could now sleep in peace. Even as he left his homeland, he knew the Lord would be with him wherever he went and that he would also bring him back home.

We can't make our own way to paradise. But as Jacob saw, there is another answer. God can open heaven and come to us. We can't build or buy a stairway to heaven. But God can extend a stairway down from heaven to earth.

As God opened heaven and revealed himself to Jacob, he also spoke of how he would open heaven for all of us.

The Lord made the same promises to Jacob that he had made earlier to his father, Isaac, and his grandfather, Abraham. Those promises included descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth and a land where God would be with them. Most importantly, though, God renewed his greatest promise, the promise of a Descendant (an Offspring) through whom all nations would be blessed.

In our Gospel reading, we see that promised Offspring and we hear him point back to the dream God had given Jacob in our text.

As Jesus was beginning to call his disciples, he said to his newest disciple, Nathanael, and to the other disciples who were with him, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”***

(John 1:51). Here, Jesus directs our attention back to Jacob’s dream of a stairway to heaven and he opens our eyes to see by faith that he is the fulfillment of that dream. Jesus is the true stairway to Heaven. He is the one who unites heaven and earth. He is the one who brings the riches of heaven to us and who brings us to heaven.

We cannot work our way up to God, but in Christ, God comes down to us. He came down from heaven to earth in his incarnation, as the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He willingly made his home with us in this sin-stricken world so that we can one day be at home with him in Paradise.

And to open the doors to Paradise for us, he let the doors of heaven be slammed shut on him as he was forsaken in our place on the cross.

There he bore in his body all our sins and as the just judgment for those sins, he suffered the exile of being cut off from all the comforts of heaven and cut off from life itself. By passing through that judgment in our place by his suffering and death Christ opened to us the way of everlasting life.

In fact, not only has he made a way for us. He himself is the way. Jesus Christ is the way to paradise. He is the stairway to heaven. All those who have Christ have the doors of heaven thrown wide open for them and those doors will not be closed.

That's why we don't have to worry about trying to find a way to reach paradise. The other religions of this world all try to tell us what we have to do to make our way to paradise. But the Christian Gospel is entirely different. Christianity is a "down to earth" religion in that it gives us the good news of God coming down to earth so that we don't have to try to climb up to him. He comes to us and freely gives to himself and all that is his so that in him, paradise is ours, and our heart can be at rest.

When Augustine described mankind's longing by saying that "our hearts are restless," he also pointed to where the rest that we need can be found. He said to the Lord, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." In Christ, we do have rest for our souls and in him, the paradise that we lost by our sin is ours by God's grace.

We rest in the peace of Christ now, in the comfort of the Gospel and in the Lord's Supper as a foretaste of the feast to come. One day we will be with Christ in the Paradise of heaven as we rest from labors. And ultimately, we will experience the fullness of Paradise when Christ comes again in glory to make all things new, making a new heaven and new earth where God and man will live together in Paradise in perfect fellowship. It will be very good and it will be that way forever.

Amen