

## House of God

Sermon notes for the sermon  
Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young  
On Sunday, July 17, 2011

Each of us has our list of special places. For many here today home is not here but far away on an island in the Caribbean or a nation in West Africa. When I say the word work some will think of an office building in Manhattan while others will think of a nursing care facility. School reminds our children and youth of what awaits them in the fall. I would like to share a few phrases and invite you to silently reflect on the images and people that come to mind.

Home;

Church;

Your favorite teacher;

Your best friend;

God loves you.

I hope that the images that came to mind for you made you feel good inside. If the people you thought of are still living I would encourage you to find a way to contact them in a day or two and let them know just how special they are to you. Places and people are very important and when something special happens in our lives we tend to take a mental snapshot capturing the place in our memory so that we can, with our imaginations, return in an attempt to re-create the experience.

The story of Jacob and Esau is a story filled with lots of special places and events. Who was the oldest – Jacob or Esau? It was Esau by just a few minutes or seconds. Why do we always put Jacob's name first if he is the youngest? Probably because he is the more important; he is the one who carried forth the promise made to Abraham – his grandfather. What does the name Jacob mean? Jacob means "heel grabber" or "the one who grabs the heel. The implication is the Esau and Jacob were at odds from the very beginning with Jacob trying his best to be the oldest. He lost out to Esau in the womb but in the end he won the war. Jacob is every younger sibling's hero; I should know since I have an older brother. While I can never be the oldest I try my best to outshine my big brother and do not miss an opportunity to make him look bad.

Jacob, the bearer of God's promise to Abraham, cheated his brother out of his birthright – the rights reserved for the eldest male son of the family; and, he cheated his brother Esau out of their father's dying blessing – the blessing intended for the eldest male son indicating that he was, upon his father's death, the head of the family. Jacob was the crafty thinker always looking for an angle to get ahead of his brother. Esau was a hunter, always looking for a way to provide for him and the family. Upon receiving Isaac's blessing Jacob, with a little coaching from his mother, realized that he had just become the hunted. As soon as Esau realized what Jacob had done Jacob knew that he would come looking for him and hunt him down. Jacob left the camp, left his family, left his responsibilities as the head of the

family and ran for his life. Today we hear the story of a very special, spiritual event that happened to Jacob while he was trying to save himself.

Jacob settled down to sleep, probably miles away from home. He was alone in the wilderness. He set up a rock as his pillow and spread out his blanket on the hard ground. As he slept he had a dream – a sacred experience of God’s holy presence. The promise God had made to Abraham and Isaac was now made by God to Jacob. The one who was the schemer and the cheat was now the one who bore the promise of God for generations yet to be born. God was with Jacob and was working all along to shape him into the man that God needed to carry on the promise. Esau would have sold it to fill his belly; he would have allowed others to cheat it away from him. Not Jacob, he would cherish the promise and protect it; he would not let another sneak in and snatch it away. Jacob, the one who grabs the heel (fighting his way into life in a effort to be first) was God’s man for the job of carrying the promise into the future.

For Jacob it was a life transforming dream; an experience of a direct relationship with God. This dream with the ladder and the angels and the voice of God would change the course of Jacob’s life. He was no longer just a man on the run, he was now a man with a mission – to keep the promise of God safe and to bring it back to the land in God’s good time. Jacob called the place Bethel – house of God.

Was Bethel the stone upon Jacob lay his head and had his dream; the stone that Jacob set up as a pillar and consecrated with oil? Was Bethel the hard ground upon which Jacob lay down for his evening sleep – the ground upon which Jacob heard God’s voice? Where was the house of God? There was no dwelling, there was no tent; Jacob was in the wilderness with no shelter. Where was Bethel? It seems to me that as Jacob went forth from this holy place as the bearer of God’s promise that he was Bethel – the house of God. The promise dwelt within him until the time when God would bring him back to the land and the promise would become a people too many to number. For Jacob the place of his life-transforming experience of God would forever be burned into his memory. When life was hard and things didn’t go the way Jacob planned it would be the image of this rest stop in the wilderness that would pick-up his spirits and urge him to move forward. That is the way it is for us as well, when life becomes difficult and even unbearable our memories bring us hope and fortitude to carry on.

While we like to look at this building as our sacred place – the Bethel of our congregation. The real Bethel is found within us. We have been baptized into Christ’s body and within our community of faith we bear the promise of God that was given to our ancestors all the way back to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. Where is Bethel, the house of God, it is here in our hearts and minds and our community of faith. And the promise is that God has blessed us and seeks to have us pass on that

blessing to all the families of the earth and to all the generations yet to be born. Amen.