

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Ninth Sunday After Trinity

I. Lessons:ⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis.ⁱⁱ

“And Jacob went out from Beersheba [**Bah-AIR-shebe-ah**], and went toward Haran [**HAIR-ann**]. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

“And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beth-el [**BETH-ell**]: but the name of that city was called Luz [**LUZZ**] at the first. And Jacob vowed 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 raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God’s house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“For as touching the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you: For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia [**Mass-ee-DOUGH-knee-uh**], that Achaia [**Ah-KYE-uh**] was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many. Yet have I sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this behalf; that, as I said, ye may be ready: Lest haply if they of Macedonia [**Mass-ee-DOUGH-knee-uh**] come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, ye) should be ashamed in this same confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up beforehand your bounty, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness. But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work: (As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever. Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men; And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the First Lesson: “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, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee.’”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

III. Introduction:

One of the principal themes of the Old Testament is the concept of *covenant*, the unique way in which the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob reached out to the men He had chosen to serve Him and entered into agreements with them that were very much in the line of contracts or treaties. Later, that series of renewed covenants led to the great agreement entered into on Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai, the parties were, first, God Himself, and, second, Moses, who represented the tribal Hebrew people that God had just liberated from slavery in Egypt.

Ultimately, of course, that series of contractual relationships was fulfilled in God’s new and everlasting covenant with all of humanity that God inaugurated by sending the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, to earth in the flesh of a human baby. That incarnate – that is, enfleshed – revelation, and the new relationship it created between God and mankind, replaced those Old Testament Covenants and will endure to the end of time.

IV. Theme:

Today’s First Lesson reminds us of that Old Testament series of renewed personal covenants that set the pattern for God’s interactions with His particular and chosen people. That series of agreements actually began with God’s post-deluge covenant with Noah,^v wherein God promised He would never again destroy life on earth. Then the next important development was God’s calling of Abraham to leave his home and kindred and to found the tribe that would mature into God’s Chosen People,^{vi} a promise which God later expanded into the gift of a homeland for the great nation He had earlier promised Abram.^{vii}

Moreover, God promised Abraham that, in due course, He would establish His Covenant with Abraham's son and heir, Isaac,^{viii} which God did in fact do.^{ix} So, where God had entered personally into covenants with Abraham and Isaac, we would expect that He would likewise enter into one with Abraham's grandson, and Isaac's son, Jacob. And that expectation forms the prelude to today's First Lesson.

V. Development:

An important feature of each of those two prior personal covenants was that God assured the continuance of the male bloodline of each patriarch concerned. This was to guarantee an unquestionably legitimate leadership, in the form of an hereditary tribal sheik or chief, for the rapidly-expanding extended family that would one day, under Moses and in the crucible of the Exodus, become the Hebrew nation. As a result of this provision for progeny, Abraham and Sarah had Isaac long after they had given up hope of having children together.

So, too, Abraham's servant was sent back to Abraham's family to secure Rebekah, whom God had chosen as a wife for Isaac, and Isaac and Rebekah eventually had Jacob. Now, as our Lesson opens, Jacob had grown to manhood and it was time for him, in his turn, to take a wife who would bear him an heir. Just as Abraham had sent his trusted steward back to Haran to find Isaac a wife from among Abraham's kindred, now Rebekah sent Jacob back to the same city, her own home, on the same errand.

Jacob's encounter with God was a vision or dream that was sent to him on that journey as he slept at the place he would name Beth-El^x [**BETH-ell**], or "House of God". That vision was of what we call "Jacob's Ladder", an image of God's messengers, the angels, passing back and forth between God and humanity, in an obvious image of mutual communication between the two parties to a covenant. Meanwhile, God announced directly to Jacob the reaffirmation of the covenants He had made with Jacob's grandfather and father. It is upon Jacob's instinctive reaction to this vision, and to that vision's message, that we will concentrate this morning.

A. When Jacob took God to be his God, he trusted that God to provide for his basic needs.

Any class in elementary business law teaches that a contract requires an offer by one party, followed by an acceptance of that offer by the other party. The vision God sent to Jacob was His offer to renew with Jacob the covenants He had already made with Abraham and Isaac. When Jacob determined to accept that offer, he did so by placing himself unreservedly under God's protection.

There were two parts to that acceptance. First, Jacob declared that he would depend on God to provide for his basic physical sustenance, using these words: "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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God...."^{xi}

In this way, Jacob acknowledged and accepted God's implicit promise that if Jacob would renew the covenant with Him, then Jacob would receive the benefits of that covenant.

B. Jacob reaffirmed the obligation of tithing as recognition of God's sovereignty over the world, and acknowledged the basic amount of the tithe as one-tenth of all one gains.

Jacob took two specific actions to demonstrate that he had accepted God's offer and had ratified the covenant God had extended to him. First, he promised to pay God a tithe of all that he possessed and, second, he erected a monument and a place of worship to that God.

Let us look first at the tithe. Just as Jacob's erection of an altar followed the pattern of his grandfather's building one in the same place, so, too, did his offer of the tithe. We first read of this tithe after Abraham's victory at the Battle of the Four Kings. On that occasion, as part of Abraham's giving thanks for God's help to him, Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, King of Salem, because Melchizedek was also priest of the Most High God.^{xii} Where Abraham could not give that thanksgiving offering directly to God, he gave it to God's agent and representative on earth.

That was the institution of the tithe, as a material way of acknowledging God's sovereignty over all the world. It is similar to rent one pays to a landlord for the use of property one does not own or the interest one pays to a lender for the use of that lender's funds. It is, therefore, a tangible acknowledgement to God, to ourselves, and to our fellows, of our being beholden to God for all that He has given us.

When Jacob accepted God's offer and became God's man, he reaffirmed this obligation to pay to God his rent for the land God had promised to give him and his descendants, land on which, in the meantime, while awaiting the transfer of title, Jacob was living and prospering: "of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee."^{xiii}

C. Jacob set up a physical memorial to God, which would serve both as a center of worship and as a positive witness to the world.

Now let us look at Jacob's act when he erected a monument and a place of worship to that God: "this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house...."^{xiv} This replicated the act of Jacob's father, Isaac. For Isaac, to symbolize his personal covenant with God, built an altar at Beersheba [**Bah-AIR-shebe-ah**].^{xv}

Not only did Jacob's act thus recall his father's example, but after the division of the Jewish nation into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah, the place of worship Jacob thus reestablished,^{xvi} sitting as it did virtually upon the border between the two states, would become the principal cult center for that Northern Kingdom.

The establishment of a lasting physical memorial, in the form of a place of worship, is a basic human instinct when dealing with any highly important event that is expected to have great significance for coming generations. There are in this world a great many "memorial churches", whose construction bears witness to that impulse. Many tourists have seen one of the most famous examples of this which sits in the middle of the city of Berlin. It is the bomb-shattered ruin of the Kaiser Wilhelm

Memorial Church that was built to commemorate the unification of Germany in 1870 under Emperor Wilhelm I.

The altar that Jacob built, as it developed into one of the Israelites' most places of worship, was a constant reminder to them of God's personal dealings with the three patriarchs who founded their race.

VI. Conclusion:

As Christians, we believe that God is always extending His offer to enter into a covenant relationship with any man or woman who is prepared to accept Him. When we accept that offer, then we, like Jacob, accept certain obligations, not least among them the obligation to show visibly to the world that we are God's people.

To do this, there are no better ways than those that Jacob used. Thus we can show ourselves and the world that we are sincere in our new Christian profession.

First, we can, and should, declare that we accept God's offer and make ourselves His people. This we most commonly do in the promises and undertakings at our baptisms. Second, we should trust in God, that He will meet our basic needs and will walk with us on our ways. Third, and as part of that trust in God, we should acknowledge His sovereignty by paying to God's representative on earth, the Church, a tithe of all we possess and all we gain. Finally, we should join in the regular worship of God in the places that have been appointed for that purpose.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Genesis 28: 10-22 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *II Corinthians 9: 1-15 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Genesis 28: 20-22 (RSV).*

^v *Genesis 9: 8-17.*

^{vi} *Genesis 12: 1-3.*

^{vii} *Genesis 15: 12-21.*

^{viii} *Genesis 18: 21.*

^{ix} *Genesis 26: 2-5 and 26: 23-25.*

^x *Traditionally associated with the former Arab village of Beitin, which was situated 11 miles north of Jerusalem.*

^{xi} *Genesis 28: 20-21 (RSV).*

^{xii} *Genesis 14: 17-20.*

^{xiii} *Genesis 28: 22b (RSV).*

^{xiv} *Genesis 28: 22a (RSV).*

^{xv} *Genesis 26: 25.*

^{xvi} *Abraham had already erected an altar at Beth-El, Genesis 12: 8, 13: 3-4, but that had apparently fallen out of use by his grandson's day.*

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