

UNKNOWN FIRE

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

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Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹²And 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!

¹³And 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. ¹⁴Your 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. ¹⁵Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and [U](#) will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." ¹⁸So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

²⁰Then 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, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

We are in the season of Pentecost in the church year. And for our theme this year, we have adopted the image of fire. Fire is mentioned in the story of Pentecost, and is the most enduring image of this event. As we go through this portion of the church calendar, we are exploring the meaning of fire as metaphor and image, and how it relates to our Christian lives.

Fire often symbolizes passion. It means something that is powerful and alive. Like other forms of life, fire can grow, can reproduce itself, and can move from place to place. It's not really alive, but we can see the similarity between fire and life. And that similarity has led many cultures to see fire as the energy that propels life and that mirrors human passions. We say that

somewhat who is passionate is 'fiery'. We talk of people being 'on fire' for God, or for some other reason. We speak of people who are in love as 'smoldering' with passion. And we will examine what passion means in our existence as both humans and believers.

Fire is also associated with light. Light lets us see things in a different, better way. And passions alter our perception just as light alters our eyesight. Where there is fire, things are looked at differently. We are examining the differences in our spiritual outlook that occur when we become passionate for God and God's ways.

Fire changes things. Fire destroys the old and makes way for the new. Fire eats up the material things that we prize so much, and changes our world, whether we like it or not.

Fire is power. Burning various substances in a controlled way has let us humans do things we could not otherwise do. We burn gasoline to go from place to place. We burn fuel oil, or natural gas, or coal, or wood, to heat our houses. We have harnessed fire to build the civilization we enjoy today.

And fire is ambiguous. Fire can be both good and bad, sometimes at the same time. Fire can produce, and fire can destroy. Fire can light the way, and eat up the forests we need. Fire can take us to new places, and can let us destroy the new

places we are taken to. Passions, too, are ambiguous. A love for God can make us bold, and can make us reckless, uncaring. Passion for the success of God's work can create both a Mother Theresa and a David Koresh. So: fire is passion, is powerful, changes things, creates and destroys, changes our perception, and is ambiguous.

Our text this morning is the familiar text of Jacob and his dream. Jacob is on a trip, he lays down to sleep, and he has a dream. In his dream, Jacob sees a ladder between heaven and earth, and angels ascending and descending the ladder. Then he sees God at the top of the ladder. God makes Jacob the promises that he, God, had made to Abraham and Isaac: God will bless Jacob, and give him many descendants, and care for him and his family. Then Jacob wakes up. After he wakes, Jacob builds an altar to God, and makes that wonderful statement: "God was here and I did not know it". Then Jacob makes some promises to God, and continues his journey.

On the surface, this seems a simple story. There don't even seem to be many questions unanswered in this account. Jacob is the heir to the promises that were made to Abraham. Jacob is traveling, and god speaks to him and makes the same promises

that god has already made to Abraham and Isaac. The promises are not new, and as Jacob is the son of Isaac, all seems in order.

But when we begin to examine the story we find some very interesting elements. Let us begin by looking more closely at this guy Jacob. Yes, he was the son of Isaac. But he was not the eldest son. And the eldest son would normally have been the heir. So why is Jacob the heir?

It's certainly not because Jacob is such a good person. He is not so much travelling as he is running away. He has cheated the eldest son, Esau, his brother. And now he is running away to his uncle Laban's place to escape the anger of Esau. He has not only cheated Esau, but in doing so, he has connived with his mother and deceived his father. Jacob has lived up to his name, which means 'cheater' or 'deceiver'. You would not want to buy a used car, or anything else for that matter, from this guy Jacob.

And in all his cheating, Jacob has not shown any concern for God, or God's rules. There is no record he had talked to God prior to this event. He was not a righteous man.

And God comes to him anyway! I believe God came in a dream because this was the only time when Jacob would slow down enough to listen. Many of us are like that: we have no time to listen to God. But God comes anyway.

And God makes the same promises to Jacob that he had made to Abraham and Isaac. God did not lessen the promises because Jacob was such a sinner. What a gracious God.

Then we notice what Jacob does. He builds an altar, and acknowledges God. This is good, but what a sad statement he makes: 'God was here and I did not even know it'. How many of us are in the same boat. God shows up in our lives, and we don't recognize it.

And what about the ladder? Why this particular visual image? I believe that God was telling Jacob that he, God, is continuously interacting with this world. God is not just sitting somewhere else watching. God is constantly acting in our lives. There is a ladder from heaven to earth, one that is built and sustained by God.

So let us be like Jacob was in the end: aware that no matter our sins, God is acting in our lives.