

Sermon on Genesis chap. 28

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the 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. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him 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; ¹⁴and 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 all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that 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." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke 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."

May God bless these words and help us to grow in our understanding of his will, and may God help us to live according to his blessing.

Dear brothers and sisters

I bring you the greetings from my parish – the swiss-reformed parish of the Fraumuenster in Zuerich – I'm grateful and honored to have the opportunity to preach here at the IPC, and I'd like to thank my colleges and your pastors for their friendly invitation.

You heard the passage from the bible I will preach on today – it's the famous chapter in Jacobs story where he sleeps there and dreams of an open heaven and hears Gods promise to him and his people – and with it I will bring (so to say) a piece of Chagalls stained glass windows to your church today!.

Is there a motif more touching and moving than this scene in the book of Genesis? Jacob laying down on the bare ground in Beer-sheba, only with a stone under his head – and dreaming. Dreaming that right before him a ladder is set up, a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, a ladder which indeed connects earth and heaven, and angels, God's messengers, move up and down.

Could you think of a stronger symbolism than this one for the experience of hearing the good Word of God, the experience that God speaks and changes a person's life? A ladder or a stairway – that invites to new steps in our lives?

It's not surprising that artists and painters liked this particular scene, and so there are hundreds, even thousands of paintings of this scene – because it's so idyllic, so picturesque:

I saw a painting by the Renaissance-painter Nicolas Dipre (in the *petit palais* in Avignon) which is so

romantic, it has almost has a moonshine-touch to it: Jacob, a relaxed dreamer, clothed in entirely in white, behind him angels, also entirely in white with huge wings, climbing up the ladder (but let me add: bright and attentive observers (as you all are no doubt) might ask themselves on closer viewing: what are the wings for, when they have to climb the ladder as we do?)

But you see – this romanticism looks great, the only problem is, that it entirely misses the dramatic background of Jacobs story, and therefore entirely misses the overwhelming biblical message of this text:

Jacob is not a relaxed dreamer, but he is a man in his deepest sorrows, a man that somehow has lost his whole life, a homeless person, literally homeless, a stranger without even a bed and a roof over his head, a man that has lost his future – and the bad news is: he is responsible for his own troubles.

We all know the story, how this smart and quick and cheeky younger twinbrother betrays Esau, his elder brother, cheating on him twice and stealing the blessing of their common father. And – no surprise – the furious and hurt and wildly crying Esau tells him: Jacob, you will not survive

all this, as soon as father is dead, Ill come and kill you.

So much for: brethren – love each other! But the Bible doesn't tell us romantic, idyllic stories – it tells us about life, how it is...

So imagine and bring before your mind: Jacob puts the stone under his head definitely not as a relaxed dreamer, but as a tired, desperate man – he has ruined his life with fraud and deception:

What would you expect him to dream? What would you dream in a situation like this? I guess a nightmare, a dream coming over and over again, how brother Esau is coming, is about to reach him, with a knife in his hand. Painful and endless moments, like loops in a nightmarish dream of how he cannot escape – of how he cannot escape the bitter storms he's now harvesting in his ship-wrecking life...

Or at least you would expect him to be confronted in his dream with his own life, with he dark deeds, and that he would at least now realize that reality and be deeply sorry about it.

Both in a Rembrandt ink drawing and in Chagalls Jacob window in Zurich – you see some of the bitter reality of this dreamer and the sorrows in his face – here you catch the biblical realism!

But then – this is a God-story and not one of our moralistic stories – and for us seekers in every Bibleword we should seek and find that gold of good news! – and so Jacobs dream is not a nightmare, but Good News – he dreams that heaven opens up, sees this ladder, and he hears God’s voice.

And sleeping and desperate Jacob sees the messengers of God, the angels, and he hears not one single moralistic word, but he hears – so to say – the Gospel, Good News: You will have a future!

God never preaches morals. God now renews and gives Jacob his blessing and says: *“Know that 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”*.

And that’s the first second in the new life of Jacob – he is reborn, so to say, personal resurrection.

But maybe – if we are honest – we are a little bit shocked about this:

Why does God not address the problem? Why no straight word to Jacob, reminding him of his past?

And in a psychological age as ours is one – we might think: this is so typical, so clear: a wish-fulfilling dream of Jacob’s. He simply couldn’t stand the reality of his life and dreamed a new future... Maybe he really couldn’t – but the God has his own view on our lives, his own view about Bad and Good news, his own way of addressing it, his own way of conveying it. And so God speaks – and that changed a lot in Jacobs life.

Not that everything was fine now, past, forgotten, future ahead – no, not at all. It’s but the beginning of something really new in this life – and Jacob will have to deal with it.

But now Jacob stands up and for the first time in his life he really says:

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” and then he adds, *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

This is something else that romanticism – he realizes that in the midst of his life: he found a “Gate of heaven” – and that changed his whole life! From that point on, he will look for reconciliation with his brother – *coute que coute* (you remember the words and cries of Esau) – Jacob knows that he has to find Esau, and say sorry and start a new life...

And therefore I like it so much that Marc Chagall painted in his “Jacob window” not only Jacob and the ladder and the angels – but between Jacob and the ladder he also painted Jacob’s fight with the angel: He squeezed Genesis 32 into Genesis 28 – because this passage belongs so vitally to the whole story of the dream.

I’m sure Chagall wanted to remind us: Not everything was fine after this dream. Jacob still has to believe the message of the dream, and he has to live it! He has to overcome all his fears. Now he has to face this past and now he has to walk up to and see his brother Esau and ask for reconciliation.

Right in the night or early morning before this decisive and dangerous step towards Esau – while passing the river jabbok, there is this fight – the fight with that dark angel – and as you can imagine: now it was getting hard for Jacob to really believe and trust his dream and take the necessary steps – and now suddenly he has his doubts, his fears rise again: Was it just a dream? Will Esau kill me? This was not an easy walk...

Jacob was not naïve himself, he knew that the past weighed heavy... and I think he suddenly shrinks from this belief: maybe he himself asked this

Sigmund Freudian question: was it simply a wish-fulfilling dream?

But then, then he trusts God, then, after *first* having cheated on the blessing, after having tried to rob it, and *then* after having been given God’s blessing, *then* he himself has to do something about it, he even has to fight for it: And so he says to that dark angel: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And that means: now I will step forward and seek reconciliation and peace with Esau – but I need God’s blessing, I need God’s help – because I fear that this might fail...

You know the story how Esau sheds away all the fears of Jacob *saying* “*What do you mean by all this company that I met?*” and then the brothers are brothers again...

I’m sure each of us has some Jacobean stories in his life – maybe not as hard as Jacobs cheating, maybe worse.

This is so wonderful about God’s Good News – here quite specifically in this Gospel-dream: it tells us about the way that God works, the way God’s love works: Not heavy morals and punishment dreams, no Wrath and Anger.

Always first the Gospel, telling us that we all are justified sinners, that means: God gives us, to each of us, new life – we only have to be so attentive as Jacob was, and I'm sure everyone of us has also his or her story where he or she could have said: *“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”*¹⁷

Think of him, being there in Beer-sheba, this stranger, this man filled with sorrows, standing up and saying: *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

Well – dear brothers and sisters – Jacob's story is a story about a gate of heaven, a wonderfully unmiraculous gate of heaven – for it deals with forgiving and promising: God first promises, and by promising he helps us to understand that he is a forgiving God, that helps us to forgive to each other. It is a story about *Gods blessing*, how it works, how it gives us new future and shapes our future, and how God helps us to deal with our past...

Let me add a pharmaceutical advice I take from this biblical story – why pharmaceutical: because Bad News is about illness, illness of our souls, illness of our thoughts, illness of our relationships – but Good News is about healing –

the Mending, Curing, Restoring: Healing of our souls, our thoughts, our relationships: So my theo-pharmazeutical advice for you today is this one: Don't forget to keep up with the content of your Souls *medicine chest*.

The idea to talk about remedies of the Souls is not mine – it has a long tradition. But the most poignant formulation came from the German-American Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, when talked about two remedies of the Soul (medicine, not drugs) – yes: sometimes one needs medicine – and every household should have a *medicine chest*, a little box with pills and necessary medicine.

What kind of remedies do our Souls need from time to time? *Hannah Arendt* says that in time and through time our souls are endangered: Things happen and get said that hurt, that destroy – like Jacobs deeds and words against Esau – things past weigh heavily on us, hurt, hurt our relationships – and then the past time so to say begins to kill the future time: And future time itself frightens us: what will time bring? What will future be like? These fears and anxieties may cause conflicts among us – how the foresee, how to react?

There are two remedies for this – says Hannah Arendt – and here she kind of summerizes biblical wisdom: Two Remedies of the Soul against all this

are *forgiving* and *promising*. The one deals with the past, the other with the future.

The faculty of forgiving is a remedy: As I said - sometimes things happen, things are said that one wishes they wouldn't have been done or said - things that can't be undone: Then the faculty to forgive each other is a wonderful remedy, which helps to find new and sound life together again.

The second faculty is the art of promising: against the unpredictability and chaotic uncertainty of the future we have the faculty to make and keep promises: a baptism e.g. and the Yes of the parents, a couples vows are such promises: what ever happens in our life and in the world - we promise to handle it together, help each other to find a way together - But remedies are genericis - so to say - of Gods Blessing - God wants us to use these generics of the Soul: *forgiving* and *promising*.

Jacob's or God's story with Jacob is a story about promising and forgiving, about that fact, that we stand so often at little gates of heaven, but the most important thing is to realize - as Jacob realized: wow, this is God speaking and working - lets listen, lets follow, lets trust his blessing and healing. Amen.