

Sermon: Arise, Go Back to Bethel
Text: Genesis 35:1 – 7
Date: August 10, 2008 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

The Book of Genesis tells us about the birth of twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Now, Esau was born covered in red hair. So I call him Hairy; and Jacob was born holding on to the heel of his brother, so I call him Grabber.

Now, when Isaac was getting old, Grabber and his mother, Rebekah, tricked Isaac into giving him the family blessing. And that really made Hairy mad, so mad that he wanted to kill his brother. So, Rebekah packed up Grabber's things and sent him to the homeland. And that night, Grabber came to a place called Luz and stopped for the night. He set up a rock for a pillar and while he was sleeping, God appeared to him in a dream. It was a dream about angels ascending and descending on a ladder and above the ladder was God Himself. And when Grabber woke up, he said: "*Surely this place was the gateway to heaven and I did not know it.*" And so he called the place Bethel – the House of God. And he set up the rock that he had used as a pillar and poured oil over it and made a vow to God: "*If you will be with me and bless me in the way I am going and bring me back safely to my father's house, then you will be my God and of everything you give me I will surely give you a tithe.*"

So Grabber goes to the land of his ancestors and he met the girl of his dreams, Rachel. And he ended up marrying Leah and Rachel and staying in the homeland for about 12 or 15 years. And when he got into a disagreement with his father-in-law, he decided

it was time to go home. And on the way, God appeared to Grabber again, this time in the form of an angel. And Grabber wrestles with the angel all night and prevails so the angel changed his name from Jacob which means Grabber to Israel.

Now, Jacob was worried about Esau. He was worried that his brother would still be mad at him and when Esau received him warmly and welcomed his entire family, there was a great reunion! And then, God speaks to Jacob a third time, saying: *“Arise, and go back to Bethel and settle there and build an altar to me there.”*

Now, someone once said, *“You can’t go home again.”* And they always say, *“Lightning never strikes the same place twice.”* But I don’t know if that’s true or not. You see, I believe that God is always calling us onward and upward. God is always calling us to deeper levels of commitment and deeper levels of faith, but God is always calling us back too. He calls us back to the place where we first committed our lives to Him, so that we can move onward and upward as those who are grounded and rooted in the faith. This morning, God is calling us all back to Bethel.

1. BETHEL IS THE PLACE OF REVELATION.

Verse 1 says: *“Arise and go back to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother, Esau.”* You see, as far as we know, Bethel is the first place God appeared to Jacob. Before this, God had walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the afternoon. He

had spoken to Cain and Abel; He had walked with Enoch; He had spoken with Noah and Abraham and Isaac. But now, God speaks to Jacob and reveals Himself to Jacob.

One of my first memories of church was Lee Valley Baptist Church. My daddy's brother, Herbert, was my Sunday School teacher and Bob Cole was the pastor. And I remember an altar call one Sunday when I felt something unusual. Now, I didn't hear an audible voice, lightning didn't flash, and the thunder didn't roll, but for some reason, God became real to me that day.

Where were you when God became real to you? Where were you when you felt God speaking to you? God is calling you back there this morning, back to the place of revelation, back to Bethel.

2. BETHEL IS THE PLACE OF RESPONSIBILITY.

Genesis 28:20 says: "*And Jacob made a vow to the Lord, "If you will be with me and protect me on the journey I am making and give me food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's house, then you will be my God ... and I will give you a tithe of everything you give me."*" Bethel was the place where Yahweh became Jacob's God. Up until this time, He was the God of Abraham and Isaac, but after this, Jacob had to stand on his own two feet. He had to claim the faith for himself.

In our United Methodist tradition, we baptize our children and bring them into the covenant community. And then, later, when they are 11 or 12 years old, we

bring them into Confirmation. And here's the question we ask in Confirmation: Have you made your parent's faith your faith? Your parents have raised you in the church; they've kept the promises they made at your baptism. Now, what are you going to do about it?

Where were you when you took responsibility for your relationship with God? When you said, "*God, you are my God and I want to live my life for you*"? God is calling us back there this morning, back to that place of responsibility, back to Bethel.

3. BETHEL IS THE PLACE OF REPENTANCE.

Verse 2 says: "*Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.'*" You see, this gives us some insight into what Jacob's life had been like in the homeland. When Jacob married Rachel and Leah, they brought along their gods and Jacob just let it happen. He compromised. He promised to serve God, but he had also been serving other gods too. And now, when God called Jacob back, the first thing Jacob did was repent.

You know, we've all made promises we haven't kept. We promised to be faithful with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. We promised to put God first and to allow nothing to come between us and God. We promised, but we compromised. Time passed and circumstances pulled us away from the vows of our baptism.

God is calling us back this morning, back to the place of repentance, back to Bethel.

4. BETHEL IS THE PLACE OF RECOMMITMENT.

Verse 14 says: “Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked to him and he poured a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. And he called the place ... Bethel.” This is a renewing of the covenant, a time of rededication and recommitment for Jacob.

When you and I were baptized, we entered into God’s covenant community. And every Sunday is an opportunity for us to renew that covenant, to recommit ourselves to God. Certainly, every time we celebrate Holy Communion, we renew our covenant and rededicate ourselves to the Lord.

But today, we have an opportunity to do that in a different way. For God is calling us back this morning, back to that place of recommitment, back to Bethel.

This morning, we’ve come to renew our covenant with God, by remembering and renewing our baptism. Will you answer God’s call and go back to Bethel with me?

Find your bulletin Insert