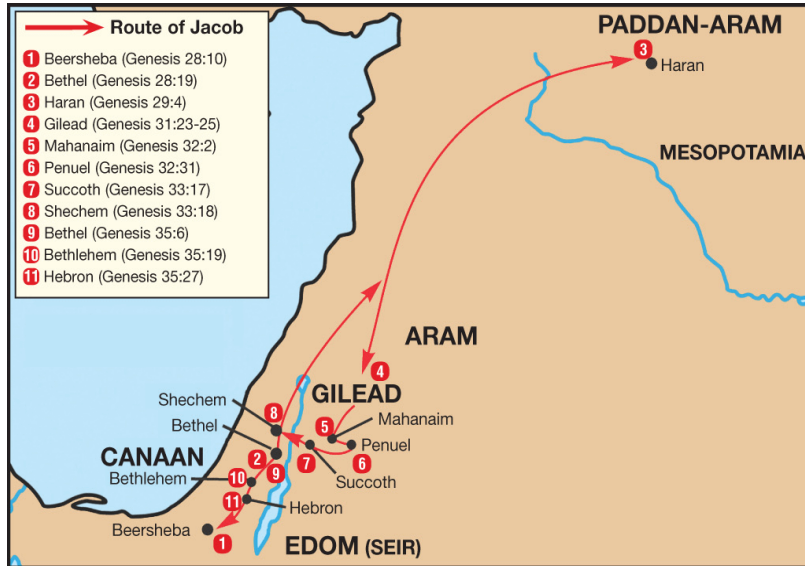


# EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST JULY 23, 2023



## ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

10207 Lincoln Trail  
Fairview Heights, IL  
Telephone 618-397-6323  
Office Hours Wed. & Fri. 9-2

e-mail– [stjohnuccfairview@gmail.com](mailto:stjohnuccfairview@gmail.com)

Website: [www.stjohnfairview.org](http://www.stjohnfairview.org)

Rev. Rosemary Captain

### \*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:

ONE: God has searched us and knows us.

God knows when we sit down and when we rise up.

**MANY: God searches out our path and our lying down. God is acquainted with all our ways.**

ONE: Before a word is on our tongues, God knows it. God's hand is ever available to guide us.

**MANY: Such knowledge is a wonder to us. It is beyond anything we can attain.**

ONE: We cannot escape from God's spirit. There is nowhere to flee from God's presence.

**MANY: Darkness is as light to our God. Go illuminates the way before us.**

**\*PRAYER OF INVOCATION:** Search us. O God, and know our thoughts. We gather with eager longing to know you, ever-present God, and to be known by you. We want to live as your beloved children.

Assure us in these moments that you hear our prayers, even as your will is revealed to us. Fill our dreams and our waking hours with radiant hope.

May every time of encounter move us to awe and fervent worship. Lead us in your way everlasting.

Amen.

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION:** When we run away from our problems, we discover that we cannot run away from ourselves. Yet God is present with us to hear our confession and offer forgiveness. God brings us back to face what we have left behind in order that we may claim the promise of reconciliation and wholeness.

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

**Search us and test us, that all wickedness may be purged from us, O Creator. Save us from our futile striving after our own advantage. Reshape our will to conform with your intentions for us. We confess that we have allowed weeds to grow in our lives. Our focus has drifted from the harvest you intend to the fears and greed that hold us hostage. Release us from bondage to decay that we may grow in likeness to Jesus Christ. We want to bear fruit for you. Turn us to the brightness of a new day. Amen.**

**\*ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:** If by the Spirit we put to death the misuse of our bodies, we will live. We are set free from bondage to death to claim the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Live in the hope God offers, waiting with patience for all that

God will yet reveal. You will shine like the sun in the realm of God, who leads us in the way everlasting.

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Genesis 28:10-19a**

**The dream of Jacob will be identified for thousands of years as Jacob's ladder.**

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. <sup>11</sup> He reached a certain place and spent the night there. When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. <sup>12</sup> He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup> Suddenly the LORD was standing on it and saying, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. <sup>15</sup> I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you."

<sup>16</sup> When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The LORD is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. <sup>17</sup> He was terrified and thought, This

sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven. <sup>18</sup> After Jacob got up early in the morning, he took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He named that sacred place Bethel, though Luz was the city's original name.

### **EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 8:12-25**

#### **Paul defines our relationship with God through the Holy Spirit as that of adopted children.**

<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. <sup>13</sup> If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup> All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. <sup>15</sup> You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup> The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup> But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

#### **Our suffering and our hope**

<sup>18</sup> I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. <sup>20</sup> Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. <sup>23</sup> And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. <sup>24</sup> We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

#### **MESSAGE: "Consequences and Surprises"**

Jacob finds himself all alone at nightfall. He is on the run from his brother Esau because of a blessing.

As the dim-eyed Isaac embraces Jacob, mistaking hi for his favorite son Esau, he exclaims: "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the

Lord has blessed. May God give you the dew of Heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine” (Genesis 27:27-28).

How hollow this blessing must sound now to Jacob, a fugitive with only a hard stone for a pillow. Esau’s rage over the stolen blessing forced Jacob to abandon his quiet ways among the tents (Genesis 25:27; 27:41). To escape with his life, Jacob had to leave forever the mother who favored him and who had schemed with him to secure his father’s blessing.

Contrary to appearances, Jacob is not alone. A dream reveals that his resting place is full of busy angels, or more literally divine “messengers.” These beings are purposeful in their ascent and descent on a stepped structure joining earth to heaven. They are on the move doing God’s work in the world. Jacob also encounters God of this awesome “gate of heaven.” Jacob is surprised to discover that he has been a guest at the “house of God”, which is the literal meaning of the name Bethel.

Bethel was an important Israelite shrine city, most closely associated with the patriarch Jacob. Before Jacob’s time, Abraham built an altar to the east of Bethel, where he called upon the name of the Lord (Genesis 12:8). Later, Bethel was one of two national

shrines of the Northern Kingdom (the other being Dan) set up by King Jeroboam I in the ninth century BCE. We can read this in 1 Kings 12:25-33.

Ancient Mesopotamia provides insight into some aspects of Jacob’s meeting with God at Bethel. In cities such as Ur and Babylon there were artificial mountains known as ziggurats that correspond to the stairway in Jacob’s dream. *(Personally I did not know what a ziggurat was. Webster says, “an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower consisting of a lofty pyramidal structure built in successive stages with outside staircases and a shrine at the top. It is rectangular in shape.”)* These structures were the place where earth and heaven meet and where the gods dwell.

Within this cultural context, it seems natural that Jacob should see God positioned at the top of the steps to heaven: “the Lord stood it” it says in Genesis 28:13, meaning above the stairway. But in the Hebrew text, God’s location is less than clear. The same prepositional phrase translated as “above it” may also be translated as “beside him,” meaning alongside Jacob: “The Lord stood beside him” in Genesis 28:13. *(Our Hebrew lesson for today.)* This second translation suggests that, like the divine

messengers, God is on the move to accomplish a mission.

God confirms that God intends to accompany Jacob in all of his travels: “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 you”. We can read this in Genesis 28:15.

In what seemed like a lonely flight to escape from Esau, Jacob has discovered that he is in good company. His hasty journey assumes something of the character of the rapid motion of the divine messengers. Just as Jacob left his home in Beersheba, so God departs from his own “house” in Bethel to join him on the road, until they return to this special place of divine indwelling (Gen. 28:20-22; 35:1-15).

Jacob’s journey also receives a larger purpose through this vision. His travels further God’s intention of extending blessing to all the families of the earth. At Bethel, Jacob learns a new way of thinking about blessing. Jacob comes to recognize how his own conflicted story contributes to God’s gracious purposes for humankind.

As we have learned, Jacob’s family of origin assumed that a father had only one blessing to impart as death drew near. Esau can only weep and plan for revenge when he arrives too late and Jacob has already taken the blessing: “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father” (Gen. 27:38).

By contrast, when God renews the covenant with Jacob, the promises of land and descendants are linked to an inclusive and far-reaching concept of blessing. *(I think this is the important message for us today from this story; God gives blessings to many, not just the oldest sons.)* The comparison between Jacob’s descendants and dust establishes this connection: “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” (Gen. 28:14).

To summarize, in this passage God is revealed as dwelling in Bethel, the “house of God,” only to be identified also as the God who accompanies Jacob on the way. A stone used as a crude pillow for a passing traveler, marks the place of going and coming, of ascending and descending, and of spreading out in

four directions. The purpose for all of the energy is God's blessing of all the families of the earth.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE MESSAGES. I have many questions about Jacob. He is not the nicest guy, yet God gives him a successful rich life. I always thought the good people should inherit the earth. These stories about Jacob show me how my ideas of judgement are not God's. What are your thoughts? Amen.

#### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

With our voices we cry to you, O Lord; with our voices we make supplication to you, O Lord. We pour out our complaints before you; we tell our troubles before you and the adversities of our world.

Grant to your church the compassionate spirit of Jesus who saw many people, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. As we have enjoyed comfort and care in your congregation, may we welcome strangers and foreigners into our company that they may share your grace, your guidance, your words and the company and care from a church family.

Send us to those who have been scattered that they may be returned to your fold and to the lost that

they may find themselves and commit themselves to your keeping.

Mortal but eternal Christ, you shared our humanity and know human weakness and strength. Hear our prayers for the sick and the aged. As their days shorten, so let their strength be lengthened. Encourage the depressed; give joy to those who are sad and sorrowing; strength the resistance of those who are tempted to evil; grant your grace to those who have fallen and lift them up again. Give peace to the dying and light at eventide.

We praise your hallowed name, Fatherly, Brotherly, Motherly God, as we pray together the prayer your Son taught us . . .

**THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:** We are debtors to God, who has given us the precious gift of life. We were created of good seed in God's own image that we might bear fruit for God's realm. We have the

capacity to dream and envision a better world, free of the sin that so often seems to choke out the good. Through our offerings we give support to our common mission.

**\*UNISON OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

Thank you, God, for the rich heritage of faith we have received from our ancestors. We are grateful that your Spirit is ever with us, assuring us of your acceptance and love. May our offerings share this good news with other children of God who have not yet discovered their identity. May all of us grow in righteousness that we might together experience the reality of your realm in our daily lives, here and now and for all eternity. Amen.

**\*COMMISSION AND BLESSING:**

ONE: Scatter to serve, listening for God's direction. Let your faces shine with the good news you have received.

**MANY: The Spirit of God will lead us day by day. God claims us and is with us every moment.**

ONE: God promises to be with us wherever we go. We can say, "Surely God is in this place."

**MANY: God searches us and knows us. All our thoughts and actions are discerned by God.**

ONE: Let us live, then, according to the Spirit. Let us show forth the first fruits of the Spirit.

**MANY: With eager longing, we seek to live in the Spirit. We look up with hope and patience and joy. Amen. Amen.**

**CONDOLENCES to the family and friends of  
Mari Ella Gianino**

**CONDOLENCES to the family and friends of  
Nancy Smith**

**PRAYER LIST:** Carson Edwards, Yvonne Weber, Marilyn Paul, Beth Sheldon, Mary Holcomb, Syd Safriet, Ronald Bopp, Rosemary Williams, Becky Ballard, David Seneczyn, Urban Baum, Luz Captain.

