

SERMON TITLE: "Dwelling in God's House of Dreams"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 28:10-22
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 16, 2016 (Stewardship Drive #1) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Back in September, there was a historic home show in Ogden's east bench area. The tour was on a busy Saturday, so I didn't get to go. But I thought about it. They were featuring houses built in the late 40s and 50s. Since my own east bench house is from that era, I thought it would be interesting to see what other people were doing to maintain and decorate their homes.

Besides the minimal-traditional, ranch-style, and mid-century-modern style residential houses that were on the tour, there were also two houses of worship. The tour began at the St. Paul Lutheran Church and also included the Congregational United Church of Christ. Both those congregations purchased their land in the 50s and hoped to build sooner than they actually did. The St. Paul Lutherans converted a barn into a school before they got around to constructing their church, and the Congregationalists had to sell off the frontage of their property before they could afford to begin construction. Before their current buildings were dedicated in the early 60s, you could say that both of those congregations spent a number of years dwelling in God's house of dreams.

Today is the first of four Sundays in which we are going to be talking about "Dwelling in God's House." I invite you to consider Genesis 28 with me, as we begin this series with Jacob's story of dwelling in God's house of dreams.

1—CONNECTING WITH GOD AND RECEIVING AND SHARING A GRACE-FILLED FUTURE

The first thing we notice in Jacob's story is that dwelling in God's house of dreams meant being in a place where Jacob could connect with God. While he lay asleep on that particular piece of ground, Jacob dreamed that he was at a spiritual gateway. He dreamed of angels ascending and descending on a ladder or stairway to heaven. He experienced God coming near him and speaking with him. For

whatever reason, Jacob hadn't had that kind of sacred experience before. He hadn't known God's presence so clearly anywhere else. In the dream, God told Jacob that God would be with him anywhere Jacob would go. But the promise Jacob held onto most dearly was that God would connect with him in that place, and that that very land would be Jacob's spiritual home.

Even though Jacob's dream came to an end when he awoke in the morning, dwelling in God's house of dreams wasn't a fleeting experience for Jacob. So profound was this dream, so powerful was his experience of God, so possessing was this place that Jacob's life was forever changed. Just prior to camping out there for the night, Jacob had been a conniving brother and deceiving son, who had to flee from his brother's wrath. Things had not been going well for him. Jacob needed a positive change. He needed an encounter with God to set him straight. And, fortunately for Jacob, God showed mercy and grace. Instead of chastising him for his attitudes and behaviors, God ministered to his broken spirit with a word of promise. When Jacob's life was shattered, God gave him a dream of hope.

Dwelling in God's house of dreams meant a positive and grace-filled future not only for Jacob, but also for his offspring. Generations of Jacob's descendants would look back to that land as their spiritual home, the ground of their being, the holy place where they and God could reside together. Launching out from that blessed place, Jacob's offspring would then share that blessing with the rest of the world. Dwelling in God's house of dreams was no small thing. It was a big, big house where Jacob, his descendants, and all the families of the earth would begin connecting with God and sharing the blessing of a grace-filled future.

Dwelling in God's house of dreams was such an awesome experience for Jacob that he couldn't help but respond to God with his own promise. In verses 20 through 22, we read that Jacob made a vow. If God would be with him and provide for him bread to eat, clothing to wear, and the ability to return to his father's house in peace one day, then Jacob would remember that place as God's house and give back to God one tenth of all that God would provide for Jacob. This sacred experience was a

covenant in which Jacob was a full partner and a responsible resident. Sharing a tenth of his income would be Jacob's contribution toward dwelling in God's house of dreams.

2—APPLICATION TO US

That's Jacob's story in Genesis 28. But we here at First United Methodist Church also have a story of dwelling in God's house of dreams. Not all of us were around in the good old days when the congregation worshiped at 26th and Jefferson in downtown Ogden. But most of us have heard the stories. We know that there were wonderful times in that old church. We know that people connected with God there in magnificent ways through the music of the pipe organ, the sermons that were preached, the Sunday School classes held, the fellowship dinners eaten, and far more weddings, funerals, and baptisms than anyone could recall.

And yet, the time came when God put a dream in the minds of many of you—the dream of purchasing new land and constructing a new building. You dreamed of dwelling in this new house of God—a place where you could have, and *have had*, deeply spiritual connections with God; a place that has provided a grace-filled environment for children and grandchildren to develop their faith; and a place that has been a tremendous launching pad for service and mission outreach to bless the Ogden community and the people of the world.

I'd like to think that dwelling in God's house of dreams means all this for us right here at First United Methodist Church. I'd like to think that this is our special place where we connect with God's forgiving love that overcomes our sinful and wounded spirits. I'd like to think that this is our place where we experience God's holy and healing power that offers promise and hope. I'd like to think that this church is that kind of special place where we are able to hear God's voice teaching and directing us in new ways. Through prayers, preaching, and music; through stained glass windows and the kindness of the congregation; through rituals of baptism, membership confirmation, and holy communion—this is the place where you and I connect with God.

The truth is that we *are* dwelling in God's house of dreams, and now that we're here, we're dreaming even more. We're dreaming of how we can take good care of this church property and use it wisely for ministry. We're dreaming of how we can fill up this house of God with more children, youth, and adults eager to worship and learn. We're dreaming of how we can fairly compensate our ministry staff who help us connect with God through Sunday school lessons and music. We're dreaming of how we can renegotiate our mortgage at a lower interest rate and pay off our debt in a reasonable amount of years. As our vision statement says, we're dreaming of how we can do a better job of "meet[ing] spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world." We're dreaming about how we might someday purchase the land on the north side of our building, so we can have clear frontage on 400 North. With our endowment fund, we're dreaming about how we can ensure that there will be sufficient money in future years to provide a blessing for generations to come.

We could think of dwelling in a house of dreams as a wild-eyed futuristic fantasy. We could think of it like trying to live in a house of cards—that will soon fall down. But the story of Jacob isn't about failure. Genesis chapters 29-35 tell us that Jacob went to live with his Uncle Laban, worked very hard, endured a number of difficulties, made a success of himself, had a big family, and eventually returned to seek and receive forgiveness from his brother Esau. In the end, Jacob did come home to this land. It was no fantasy. It took some years to work out, but finally, dwelling in God's house of dreams was exactly what Jacob and his family did.

Having a future in God's house is important for us today, as well. In this relatively new building with lots of open space around us, children, youth, and adults of all ages feel safe here to worship, learn, and play. In this fresh environment, we have the potential to feel God's presence for decades into the future. But that future will only be realized if we do our part. Promises are two-way streets. God offers mercy and inspiration to us, but we have to respond. As Jacob showed us, the only way this relationship can have a future is if we commit ourselves to it. We have to stake a claim in the belief that dwelling in

God's house is important. Then we have to back up that dream with our financial resources. If God provides us bread to eat, clothes to wear, and peace in our hearts, will we promise to give back to God from the abundance which God provides to us? I know. I know. Some of you are thinking that Jacob's 10% is a lot of money. But consider this. In the United States, it's common to think of housing costs as something like 25-30% of our income. Compared to that, living in God's dream house at 10% is an amazing bargain! As we dwell with God, will we consider tithing our income to support God's house of dreams? Will we join Jacob in giving back to God one tenth of all that God gives us?

CONCLUSION

This stewardship theme of dwelling in God's house is very relevant for us this fall. We're asking you to pick up your stewardship envelope in the narthex today, so that you can think carefully for a few weeks, take time to pray and listen for God's guidance, and *then* fill out your 2017 pledge card and bring it back on November 6. But that's not all. We're also asking all members of the church to participate in a brief business meeting after worship this morning. Yes, you can go into the narthex and get a cup of coffee and a snack. But then we'd like you to return to the sanctuary by 11:45 so we can discuss and vote on our new mortgage application. We'll tell you all about it in the meeting. But for now, I want you to appreciate the beauty of this sanctuary, see the supportive Christian friends you have here, listen to the music and prayers yet to come, feel God's presence in this place, and recognize what a sacred and precious blessing it is that we are dwelling in God's house of dreams.