Genesis Sermon Series (20)

**“Go Up to Bethel”**

Genesis 35:1-7 / May 15, 2022

**When You Get Lost**

I don't know if any of you watched the NBC news last Tuesday. A passenger on a private plane landed safely at Palm Beach Airport on Tuesday after the pilot became incapacitated. The unidentified passenger radioed for help, telling an air traffic controller what was happening.

*“I’ve got a serious situation here about my pilot. He’s incoherent. Uh ... I have no idea how to fly the airplane,” the passenger said. He later added, “He’s incoherent. He’s out.”*

The air traffic controller, Robert Morgan, guided the passenger who found himself behind the yoke as the turbo prop aircraft traveled just off the coast of Florida. The passenger did not know where the airplane was headed and could only relay the altitude to Morgan, the traffic controller. With a calm voice, the air traffic controller instructed the passenger how to use his transponder so the aircraft could be located via radar. He told the passenger to descend to 5,000 feet.

The air controller continued to provide directions on how to operate the aircraft, but at times the passenger could not locate the instruments. Still, Morgan quietly let the passenger know when the aircraft was located by radar, approximately 20 miles east of Boca Raton. Eventually, the pilot was patched through to the Palm Beach International Airport control tower. Air traffic controllers at the Palm Beach airport directed other pilots to keep the runway clear as the aircraft landed.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the single-engine Cessna 208 landed safely around 12:30 p.m. NBC reports that Morgan, the air controller, was on a break when he got the first call from the Cessna. While Morgan is a flight instructor, he said he did not have any experience flying that particular model that the passenger was flying. After the landing, Morgan hugged the passenger whom he had just met over the radio. *“In my eyes, he was the hero,”* Morgan said. *“I was just doing my job.”*

I felt like I watched a touching movie. The air controller who calmly gave instructions in that urgent moment was a hero, and the passenger who drove the plane in communication with the controller was also a hero. After watching this news, I felt like it was a metaphor for our lives. We often get lost on the flight of life. There are times when we don't know where to go, what to do, how to fly this plane. What should we do in that moment? Today's text tells us the answer to that. Jacob got lost his way and found it again.

**Jacob Lost His Way**

Jacob returned to his hometown and settled in a place called Shechem. Shechem was the place where Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, first settled after entering the land of Canaan according to God's promise. After that, Abraham lived throughout Egypt and other parts of Canaan, but whenever he was in trouble, he returned to this place and lived in a tent under the oak of Mamre. Therefore, Shechem was the spiritual hometown of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who settled according to God's promise.

However, something unexpected happened not long after Jacob settled in Shechem. Jacob's daughter, Dinah, was sexually assaulted by a native of Shechem. Jacob's family were foreigners who had just moved, the natives at that time rejected foreigners, and they used to treat foreign women rudely. The person who sexually assaulted Dinah was a native Canaanite man and a head of the ‘Hivites.’ Jacob's family fell into great sorrow and anger when they heard that Dinah had been sexually assaulted.

However, the man who had committed the sexual assault came to Jacob's house and demanded that he take her as his wife, since he had fallen in love with Dinah and fell in love with her. In addition, he suggested that the Hivites and the families of Jacob married each other and lived together to become a nation. This proposal was practically appealing to the Jacob family, who had not yet adapted to the land of Canaan stably and was therefore anxious about the future. However, it was also a dangerous temptation for the Jacob’s family to mix with the Gentiles by blood.

Jacob's sons pretended to accept their proposal and planned to avenge them without their father's knowledge. They made a counterproposal that they would accept the marriage proposal if all the Hivites men were circumcised according to Israeli customs. The Hivites accepted the proposal and circumcised all the men. On the third day of their circumcision, Jacob's sons went in with swords and killed the Hivites men in an instant. The rumor spread throughout Canaan.

This event not only shows the circumstances in which Israel had to fight in what temptations in the course of the settlement of Canaan, but it also showed that Jacob's plan to settle in Shechem was completely failed. Jacob's daughter was sexually assaulted by a Gentile man, his sons killed them all, and Jacob's family was religiously defiled. Jacob could no longer live in the land of Shechem. He did not know where he was going and how he was going to live. Jacob suddenly lost his way. What should he do?

**Go Up to Bethel**

At that moment, in Today's text, God said, **“Go up to Bethel and settle there.”** God's answer to Jacob was ‘Go to Bethel.’ Why ‘Going to Bethel’ is the solution? Bethel was the place where Jacob snatched the blessing of his older brother son and ran away from him, and he fell asleep from exhaustion and met God in a dream. Bethel was the place where Jacob first realized that God was with him, and the place where he realized that the place he was standing on was the gate to heaven.

So, what does God's word to go to Bethel mean? It doesn't just mean going to a specific place. Bethel does not mean a certain place, but ‘a certain spiritual status.’ In other words, to go to Bethel means to go to the realization that God is with us. It also means that we should go to the realization that the ‘here and now’ where we live is the gate of heaven.

When life encounters hardships, when life gets into a dilemma, or when life encounters obstacles that make it impossible to do this or that, what we have to do is not to find an instant solution to get out of the immediate crisis, but to fundamentally change our whole way of life. It is necessary to look back and find the root solution. What we need is a fundamental solution, not a short-term solution. Going to Bethel means to go back to the root or the authenticity.

First of all, Jacob commanded all the people in his family, **“Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel.”** This was a kind of purification ceremony, and it could be said that it was a spiritual ceremony to purify oneself who had been spiritually defiled. It was a preparation to return to God. In order to truly live with God, we must throw away the things we have valued as gods. In order to truly live with God, we must wash our dirty bodies with sin and change our clothes of lies.

Jacob said to everyone. **“I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.”** Jacob understood exactly the intention of God's word to go to Bethel. It is not important to go to a place called Bethel, but to return to the spiritual status that was realized there in the past. Jacob decided to build an altar to God and live with God who was with him wherever he went, and to live consciously that the place where he stood was a Gate to Heaven.

**A Control Tower Called ‘Bethel’**

There are times when we get lost in life. There are times when the pilot who is controlling our lives suddenly loses his/her consciousness. There are times when we don't know where to go, what to do, how to fly this plane. What would be the first thing we should do then? It's a connection to the control tower. Bethel is the control tower of our spiritual journey. Every time we get lost, we have to reconnect with the Bethel. And we have to listen to the instructions of the control tower of Bethel and follow them.

**A: “Hello, control tower! control tower! Reply! I'm in trouble. I’ve got a serious situation here about my pilot. He’s incoherent. He’s out. I have no idea how to fly the airplane…”**

**B: “Hello, this is the control tower, listen carefully. Don’t forget that God is with you. Don't forget that the place you are standing is a Gate to Heaven. Only trust Him and go with Him!"**

My dear friends, if you listen to and follow the instructions of the Control Tower of Bethel, you will land safely at your destination. If you get lost while walking on your journey, be sure to go to Bethel. Amen