Those Biblical stories about the old patriarchs are marvelous. The events are portrayed in vivid, stark, pointed images, yet they have a grandeur and sweep that are hard to forget. They seem to call for some kind of epic imagination to fill out the details. No wonder Cecil B. De Mille turned to so many of them for his epics. They call for a wide screen, wind machines, and a cast of thousands. Wind machines are needed because the primitive mind associates the spirit with wind, and the greater the spirit, the greater the wind. Remember how windy it got around Charlton Heston on occasion?

Of course God speaks in silence; ask any Quaker, and reveals himself by an inner Light. But these stories from Genesis do seem to require epic treatment. I only wonder how he missed one of my favorites — the story of Jacob, an epic if ever there was one, filled with conflict and victory, love and hate, loss and fulfillment.

Consider the event described in the first reading, Jacob’s vision in the wilderness, the ladder stretching from earth to heaven and what visions it has inspired. There is the famous spiritual, “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder”, that most of you have sung. And the old hymn, “Nearer My God” refers to it in the words, “there let thy way appear, steps unto heaven, angels to beckon me nearer my God to Thee”. The prophet Hosea mentions the vision, and Jesus seems to be alluding to it when he is reported to have said in John: “Verily I say unto you—hereafter ye shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”

This is a vivid image, this vision; for this is no step-ladder set up on the plain. The stones and steps mentioned suggest an impressive kind of structure that dates back to the ancient Sumerian peoples. These were the high places of ancient worship. The tower of Babel is an example. They were like the pyramids except the top was leveled off to make a place for a shrine and the sides were not smooth but had terraces and steps for climbing. So you see the scene is a natural for De Mille and his cast of thousands.

But it is the meaning of the scene, not its grandeur, that is important. Jacob is going into exile, away from home. Earlier he had managed to get from Esau, his older brother, the heritage from Isaac, their father, which meant the leadership of God’s people first given to Abraham. This was when Esau, starving after an unsuccessful hunt, sold his rights to Jacob for a pot of lentils, and lately, Jacob had done something much worse. Isaac, old and feeble, almost blind, and sensing his imminent death prepared to give his blessing to Esau, the older son. But Jacob, at the advice of his mother who favored him, put on the clothes of Esau (who was off hunting meat for his father) and then tricked his father into thinking he was Esau, and so received the blessing, and authority, instead. And now fearing Esau might kill him in his disappointment and rage, Jacob is going off to a distant land for a time—it turns into a long time—until the trouble clears.
This is the situation, then, when Jacob, all alone in the wilderness, beset with who knows what fears and anxieties and guilt as he sees where his schemes have brought him, lies down, and with a sacred stone as a pillow, falls asleep, and dreams the vision of the angels ascending and descending on the tower. The message is clear: God speaks to Jacob from above the ladder bridging the gap between earth and heaven, and promises him the success of his inheritance.

This represents the enduring faith of the Hebrew that emerges again and again in his history: in the midst of desolation, privation and suffering God reveals himself. In the midst of Jacob’s isolation, loneliness and despair—as in the wilderness of our lives in desolation — God appears, the gap is bridged, and one can say “surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not”.

What is special here is the unexpected revelation of God. It is natural to see God in the beauty and goodness of the world we enjoy. As Browning puts it:

when “the year’s at the spring, and day’s at the morn,

morning’s at seven, the hill-side’s dew-pearled,

the lark’s on the wing, the snail’s on the thorn,

God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world”

But what if the sun is not shining on our lives, and the heavens weep, and there are terrors by night and all is not right with our world? Even here, Jacob’s ladder reminds us, God appears. This is the Hebrews’ faith that found a sign of God in Egypt when they were slaves, in the wilderness when they were starving, and in exile far from home. Even here one can say God is in this place, and I knew it not.

The Psalmist sings, “Thy way, 0 God, is in the sea, and thy path on the great waters” Not just the green pastures and sun-lit valleys the Hebrews loved, but in the terrible dark depths of the sea, — the sea, the symbol of unknown terrors for these land-loving people. Yet God’s way is in the sea as well. Though I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there his hand shall lead me. Even darkness is not dark with God. The Lord is in this place, too.

How hard it is to see this! How natural to see God’s hand in our prosperity; how hard to see it in our distress! We feel deserted, lost, rejected when defeat and disappointment loom on the horizon. But Jacob’s ladder reminds us that in the wilderness experiences of life, — and there are such, and uncontrived ones, for all of us, — God appears and from how much bitterness could we be saved if only we could see that in our fears, our failures and disappointments, and loneliness —even here is the place of God, and we knew it not!

It is not the event but our judgment on the event that makes the difference between happiness and misery. So goes the ancient Stoic wisdom. All people suffer doubt, failure. Whether this is taken as final or as an occasion for a new beginning is up to the individual and his vision of the
possibilities before him. And the infinite possibilities of renewal are ever before us. When night falls the stars appear.

But the revelation of possibilities is not sufficient; there must be a corresponding response. The possibilities have to be integrated and chosen. Possibilities become realities only as we believe in them and act on them. Where there is no vision, the people perish, but vision without decision yields nothing but idle dreams. What to choose is up to us, and this can be agonizing, to know what to choose, what to do. So many possibilities! What should I do? So many courses! What should I take? A bit of existential advice here probably in choosing a course or a mate, it is not the choice, but your commitment to your choice that is most important for success. But there is the agony of choice.

This, I think, is the meaning of Jacob’s cry, “How dreadful (awesome) is this place. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven” Earlier generations suggested this cry expresses Jacob’s fear of the consequences of his past sins. It may be true to the story to see it as existential dread in the face of the contingency of his being, and the awful responsibility to interpret and respond to the possibilities of transcendence promised by the vision.

Jacob arose from his dream convinced of the promise of the possibilities before him and moved on to new adventures. He worked and prospered. It was hard work, too. He worked for a distant kinsman Laban who had a fair daughter Rachel with whom Jacob fell in love. Laban had more tricks than Jacob. He got Jacob to work without wages for seven years with the promise of marrying Rachel, but then Jacob discovered on his wedding night his bride was to be Leah, the older sister instead. Then followed seven more years to earn the hand of Rachel as well.

As the years go by Jacob prospers. He has flocks of sheep and goats, a large family of children. The promise of the Lord seems established. And finally he prepares at long last to leave for home. But home is where Esau is, and Jacob plans how he might best overcome the enmity of Esau because of Jacob’s treatment of him.

This is the occasion of the second encounter of Jacob with God. Again a short but vivid scene (a good director would stretch out) Jacob’s adversary first appears as a man. Jacob contends mightily. He was a powerful man. After all, the day when he first met Rachel he showed his strength by lifting a huge stone that covered a well, a stone that required several men to raise. But Jacob soon realizes the nature of his opponent. He is in the hands of God. And when his hip is touched and it goes out of joint, the fight is over. But Jacob’s old determination is seen again: he holds on, beaten as he is, until the angel gives him his blessing. Now what are we to make of this?

For one thing, the encounter with God may be more than a vision of possibilities. It involves a real struggle. The person of Jacob’s opponent suggests a personal self he is battling. Perhaps it is precisely Jacob’s own self — his self-confidence, his strength, his cunning, his sense that he is his destiny that is in the way, as Jacob prepares to deal with Esau in some expedient way, while God intends a different kind of reconciliation. One thing is clear: Jacob is in the hands of God, struggle as he will. His dislocated hip is a mark of God’s power; he is wounded in the struggle.
But the result of the struggle is a changed man with a new name and a new spirit. Instead of Jacob, the usurper, he is now called Israel, prince of God. His spiritual determination has led him now to be a true patriarch, a leader under God, a man of wisdom, prayer, and patience.

And so it is with us. Sometimes the encounter with God is not a revelation of possibilities calling for our choice, but rather a struggle of our personal wishes against a larger pattern of purpose, or a conflict between our sense of our own power and wisdom and the omnipotence of God.

Sometimes, struggle as you will, you may find a course just not for you and perhaps with it, a career you have set your heart on, and you will be wounded—but not destroyed, only reshaped, reformed to new possibilities.

The encounter may be the sunny promise of the transcendent possibilities of our existence. It may be the dark and stubborn wrestling of our wills against a larger purpose we know we must follow. In either case, we should know that in the possibilities that transcend our finite limitations and the struggles that shape our spirit, surely the Lord is there.

If one were to make a movie epic of the Story of Jacob, one memorable scene would be the picture of Jacob, now with the name of Israel, limping away from his battle, wounded in body but regenerated in spirit, now pausing to rest his hip, and now touched by the rosy rays of the rising sun. And so may all our encounters be touched with the dawn of God’s promise.

Our father, we would turn to Thee today and everyday in the intimate spirit of trust and confidence of the psalmist who sang the shepherd’s psalms We would remember that thou art the shepherd — the good shepherd — who cares for his sheep even to seeking out those who are lost. When we feel lost or alone, we would remember thou dost care and wilt keep us from want. Thou dost lead us in the beautiful bounty of thy creation to green pastures of plenty and quiet watering places to reflect and restore our spirits. We thank thee that thou dost direct us on paths which lead to righteousness and peace. Lead us, Lord, that we may not wander in the wilderness of our desires.

Give us, above all, the spirit of confidence and trust in thy love and care, so that when we must tread the valleys of dark shadows, we will fear no evil, knowing that thou art with us in the darkness as well as the light, with thy rod to lead us and thy staff of defense.

Even when evils press upon us and danger threatens, give us to know that thee dost prepare for us sufficient to our needs. Thou dost promise us the oil of salvation and dost fill the cup of life brim full.

As we dwell in thy spirit of love and care, as we share the spirit of Christian love in the lives our lives must touch, surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life. Lead us in thy paths, O God, give us a vision of thee, that we may dwell with thee for ever. Amen.

Lester J. Start
Friday Chapel Service