It’s our Centenary Year! One hundred years of ministry as a cathedral in the midst of this city in the middle of England – a place that has known blessing and turmoil over this century that could barely be imagined. It’s such a privilege to share this Patronal Festival with our friends and partners from across the world. So what might God have to say to us this morning, as we find ourselves in the company of scripture’s unlikely heroes – Jacob, later to be called Israel, the man who saw God. As we look at the story together, I would like you to think how you identify with him – or where else in the story you might feel a sense of connection, in your own context, wherever that may be … as we think about it here in the Cathedral. We are going to think about the place between, to dream, of angels, of promise, the place which is home.

The place between

Jacob was just trying to survive. (That might make some of us charged with the ongoing maintenance of this building – or buildings like it – feel we have something in common with him straight away!) He had made some mistakes, and he was running. But although he was a liar and a cheat, he was still running with God’s blessing. God still had his hand on him … and so when he paused in his flight north from Beer-sheba to Haran, God was there before him. All we know from scripture is that it was a place in the middle of a journey … a non-place. As Christians, we are guardians of places between.

On Friday afternoon, many of us sat in the Chapter House to be inspired by Bill Marsh speaking about the cycle of mediation, moving from Lament, through the Unseen work of preparation, to shared Space making possible the Encounter which could unlock a way forward … often through a fresh experience of Lament as we begin to take on another’s pain. He helped us to see that for Christians we often live with one foot in present reality and the other in the hope of the future – a place which is often hidden. We know the pain and reality of that in our own faith journey, and that familiarity helps us to hold that space open for others.

When I speak at our non-liturgical events in the Cathedral, they are often at we might call the ‘back’ of the Cathedral, towards the West Screen and by Unity Steps. I often describe it as a place between, neither the devastation of the ruins nor yet the fulfillment or promise of the tapestry – but a place where we find ourselves in both life and faith, a place between: between danger and safety, between home and exile, between judgment and promise. This was a non-place, but a place where God was present - and it is here where God reveals himself to Jacob, in this extraordinary vision. We must be prepared to dwell in the in-between place. And to open that space, confidently, to others. It may be the most important place – and the place between may also be the most important in our lives, for it’s the place where we can find ourselves free to dream. By the end of our account, he says in wonder – I thought this was nowhere, but it turns out it’s the gate of heaven! This, here, this broken place, is the gate of heaven – the place where others, too can come and dream of a different future. Where their brokenness can become a place where God reveals Godself.

The place to dream

And so Jacob sleeps. It is sometimes only in the freedom of sleep that we are able to set free from our own vision of reality and to dream – to dream of what is possible with God. Martin Luther King’s dream of a new society was a dream which suggested he had somehow taken leave of his senses –and he had .. with his own eyes and ears and hands he could not see or hear or touch the reality for which he hoped. But the reality lay in God’s hands. We must dare to dream – for in our dreams, we can be touched by God.
The place of angels

Jacob dreamed of angels. Angels are messengers: the clue is in the name – it’s the same root as ‘evangelist’, which has the actual word ‘angel’ embedded within it. Messengers of God carry God’s word – and God’s word is always the word of truth – a word of truth about humanity, and a word of truth about God. That is, a word of judgment, and a word of promise. And the angels breathed into Jacob’s heart, his mind and his soul, a promise to Jacob – rather like the dreams breathed into sleeping humans in Roald Dahl’s the BFG.

The vision is of a ziggurat – a ramp, like an Escher drawing. (It is reminiscent of the bridge sculpture we had in the cathedral last week.) Angels are passing up and down it – but notice how the movement starts. The angels are ascending and descending – the movement starts from earth. The initial movement is heavenwards, an expression perhaps of Jacob’s inner turmoil, his Lament.

Sometimes we turn to another person and say, ‘Oh – you angel!’ I would like to suggest that we this can be more than a simple expression of speech – but that we are, truthfully, angels. Those who convey the pain of earth to heaven, and the promise of heaven to earth. Angels are those appointed to convey messages to and from God – we are those messengers. The community of the cross of nails is a community of those messengers. Those insanely dancing, trumpeting angels in the west screen are images of you and me, dancing between the saints. We are called to bear the Lament of the world to heaven, and to carry God’s reply. In our intercessions, we should be reaching out to God in pain. In our ministry we should reaching out the world in love. We are bearers of pain, and bearers of promise. So what is God’s reply, that we are called to bear, and how is it given?

The place of promise

In our scripture reading, it is the Lord, and not an angel, who stands before Jacob. In other passages, it’s hard to distinguish between the two. But the word that is brought here is consistent, and it’s this, in v.15:

- I am with you
- I will keep you
- I will bring you home ... and your home will be right here!

That is God’s word to us today, and God’s word through us to the world. Simply surviving can take everything we’ve got – and it does sometimes feel like that, even in an extraordinary place like this. But God has so much more …

The word through Jacob to us today is this - wherever you are in your life, that is a place where God can reveal himself, a place where to receive blessing, a place to call home. Some of us may feel more like Jacob this morning – running to survive. Some may be like the angels, called to bear truth from earth to heaven and back to earth again. All of us find ourselves somewhere – it may feel like a destination, or it may feel like a place between, but it is a place to dream, a place of promise.

So our task is to:

- Guard the places of encounter, the thin places, the places between what is and what might be
- Lament what lies behind us
- Dream dreams and share visions of what may lie before us
- Share the word of God of presence, protection and promise – to receive it for ourselves, and offer it to others, because it’s not our word, it’s the word of the Lord

The place we find is home

These are the places we are called to inhabit, and the places we are called to hold open to others. They are the places the world needs today, perhaps more than other. Here, in this Cathedral on our Patronal Festival, or wherever we have come from today. The world is looking for a way home – and we have a home to offer.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.