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Genesis 28:10-19
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A MIND-BOGGLING THOUGHT

One night, not long ago, as I was watching on television the games of the 21st Olympiad, I became suddenly conscious that one of the announcers who was as obviously thrilled by some of the performances as I, used a particular figure of speech over and over again. The performances were, he kept repeating, "mind-boggling".

I recalled that several years previous, when I had once used that phrase, one of my children accused me of manufacturing it. It is indeed an unusual hyphenated word which comes to us from the British Isles. It did not there have the same meaning as we Americans give it today when we mean by it something unusual and outstanding to the point of being almost beyond belief.

My own mind has recently been boggled many times. In this election year some of the actions of politicians boggle my mind. One of the most mind-boggling events of my life took place very recently when the Viking spacecraft landed on Mars and sent back to earth pictures as sharp and clear as could be hoped for by the most ardent photographer. The whole space program is mind-boggling. It is almost beyond the imagination. It is amazing and on the verge of the miraculous. It is an outstanding accomplishment which is difficult for the mind of man to comprehend, yet it is the mind of man that has accomplished it all.

With our successful explorations into outer space we are getting more and more fascinated by the possibility that there is life on other planets, in other solar systems, with whom we may one day communicate. Reading about that recently, I came across a statement by a scientist, Lee DuBridge, who exclaimed, "Either mankind is alone in the galaxy, or he is not; either alternative is mind-boggling."

Some people seem worried and concerned about the world coming to an end. That's a mind boggler! Well, life on earth may one day come to an end, but it will more likely be the result of man's actions rather than God's. The universe itself is constantly changing, but it is unlikely that it will come to an end, at least in our time. When I was at the university it was estimated that the universe was about ten billion years old. That's pretty mind-boggling. Nevertheless, through the study of radio active nuclear decay, scientists now tell us the universe is twice that old, or 20 billion years. That is even more mind-boggling. If it has gone on for 20 billion years it seems likely that it will go on for a few million more.

II

But now let me re-tell and paraphrase the story of Jacob as it is recorded in the book of Genesis, for within that story there is also a mind-boggling idea. Jacob, son of Isaac, was traveling from Beersheba

to Haran, a journey of nearly 150 miles, a very long journey in those days. One evening when the sun had set he stopped at a convenient spot and lay down to sleep with a rock as his pillow. These were days in which there were no sleeping bags, nylon tents, primus stoves and freeze-dried foods. One might well imagine that under such circumstances of discomfort you and I might have had a disturbed sleep, but Jacob was used to such conditions. He fell asleep almost at once and began to dream. The fact that his dream was of God is very significant. We usually dream about that which is most in our thoughts. How often do you dream of God?

In any case, Jacob in his dream saw a ladder--a ladder so long that it reached from earth to heaven. Angels were ascending and descending the ladder and God stood beside it. We are not told the significance of the ladder or of the angels. Perhaps it was just background for what God was about to say to Jacob, brought to Jacob's mind by the rocky hills which surrounded him. Perhaps it was indicative of Jacob's longing to reach out for God, to communicate with the God who was, in his anthropomorphic concept, in the heavens above, far away, unreachable, inscrutable.

But then God spoke to Jacob. He reiterated the promise he had made to his grandfather, Abraham; this land would belong to Jacob and his descendants and those descendants would be many, and would be blessed. God concluded, however, with these words,

*"I will be with you, I will protect you,
I will not leave you."*

When Jacob awoke he knew he had had a mind-boggling revelation of the nature of God. It was a completely new concept to him and he cried out, "Truly, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

Most of us here this morning have been admonished all our lives by parents, teachers and preachers that God is with us. We either deny it or we take it for granted. But once we truly comprehend the significance of that tremendous idea it will be as mind-boggling to us as it was to Jacob. Just think, God is in this place with us right here and right now! The God who created this 20 billion year old universe that is far larger and far more complicated than the human mind can possibly conceive--that God is right here in our midst this morning. When you grasp the significance of that thought it does indeed boggle the mind.

David, who wrote the Psalms, must surely have entertained this thought. Perhaps he had the story of Jacob in mind, when he wrote in the 139th Psalm:

*"Where can I escape from thy spirit
Where can I flee from thy presence?
If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, again I find thee.
If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning
Or dwell at the limit of the western sea,
Even there thy hand will meet me
And thy right hand will hold me fast."*

David had already proclaimed that this conviction about God was mind-boggling to him when he wrote,

*"Such knowledge is beyond my understanding,
So high that I cannot reach it."*

You and I have both been through the whole process, haven't we; accepting one moment, rejecting the next; saying, "Yes, it must be true", and "No, it cannot be true." We are seeking to comprehend and to understand infinity with our little finite minds. It cannot be done. We can only grasp a small kernel of the truth and to that we must cling with faith.

The very existence of the universe is mind-boggling. It is hard to believe that God made it; it is impossible to believe that he did not. Listen to this ancient Hebrew Midrashic story.

A pagan paid a visit to Rabbi Akiba in order to taunt him.

--Who created the world? he asked.

--God, blessed-be-His-name, replied the sage.

--Really? Then prove it.

--Very well, said Rabbi Akiba. Come back tomorrow.

The pagan returned the following day.

--What are you wearing? asked the sage.

--That's a strange question, said the pagan. I am wearing a suit.

--Really? And who made it?

--The tailor.

--Prove it, said Rabbi Akiba.

Whereupon the pagan became angry.

--What, don't you know that it is the tailor who made the clothes we wear?

To which the sage replied:

--And you don't know that it is God who made this world we live in?

The pagan went away.

Having witnessed the two exchanges, Rabbi Akiba's disciples expressed surprise: they could see no connection. And so the sage explained:

"--Know this, children, that just as the house attests to the builder and the garment to the tailor and the door to the carpenter, the world is and will be God's testimonial; one has only to look at it to understand that what it affirms is God."

Maybe some can look at the world and all that in it is and say, "It's a great big cosmic accident that has no meaning." I cannot do that. My heart, my soul, my mind, will not permit me to do that. I know, in the only way I can know, that He is in this place.

And what is that way in which it can be known? It is the way of faith. But it can never be faith which is blind acceptance. It is faith, or belief, or conviction, based upon the most reasonable, the most noble, and yes, the most beautiful hypothesis. So to believe is indeed mind-boggling. But not to believe? For me, at least, that is impossible. The very mind that is boggled by belief refuses to accept unbelief.

III

May I remind you once more of what Gerald Heard has said: "The chief obstacle to our belief in God is not the strain on our credulity, it is the demand upon our character." If we believe, we must act upon that belief. That is why the story of Jacob records:

"Then he was afraid and said, 'How fearsome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.'"

But Jacob knew that he had to pay a price for this conviction. He had to make a commitment to this God, and that he did. He made a vow to be loyal to God and concluded,

"And of all that thou givest me, I will without fail allot a tenth part to thee."

The beginning of the tithe!

Jacob named that place in the wilderness, Bethel, for that is where he met God; and the name Bethel means, "the house of God". But the whole universe is the house of God and you and I can meet him anywhere. When we truly meet him we gain a new enlightenment, as did Jacob, and realize, "Truly the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

It is indeed a mind-boggling idea, but the greatest thing about it is, that it is true.