

March 28, 1982
Genesis 32:24-32 (NE)

Norman S. Ream

"SOMETHING TO LEAN ON"

I am thinking, this morning, of a young man who, just twenty years ago this Covenant Sunday morning, knelt in front of the altar of this church to be confirmed in the Christian faith and be received into the church. A few days before, he had been in my study having the interview which we require of all those young people preparing for membership. In the course of our discussion at that time, we somehow or other hit on the subject of immortality and this young man suddenly exclaimed, "I'm never going to die!" He was, of course, young; he was strong and virile, and religion with its offer of spiritual strength and comfort and courage did not mean very much to him. He had no felt need for it. In that, he was not untypical of most young people.

Some fifteen years later, however, that same young man, now not quite so young, again sat in my study. This time it was at his request, and this time he could not hold back his tears--tears of sadness and remorse--for he had come to see me about his marriage which I had solemnized a few years before, and which now was hopelessly disintegrating. Now he needed those "invisible means of support" which we call the comforts of religion. Now he desperately needed what he had taken so lightly as a teenager. He needed something to lean on. His story could be repeated a million times or more.

The story of another young man also comes to my mind this morning. This young man I did not know when he was a teenager. I met him in the veteran's hospital when he was in his early twenties, the victim of a mountain climbing accident, paralyzed from the waist down. I never once saw this young man in tears. I never once heard him complain about his condition. In his earlier life, at home and in church, there had been instilled into this young man a strong and wonderful faith, a faith in the love of God which can sustain and strengthen us in any emergency. This young man, still paralyzed, has overcome every obstacle put in his way and is a radiant, dynamic, Christian personality. Early in life he discovered something to lean on.

Most of us adults here this morning are pretty much like most of the teenagers sitting before me. When we were in high school and college, we too complained of certain subjects we were required to study. "Why do I have to study this stuff? I'm never going to use it or need it." And in some cases, we were right. I was one who said that about algebra and so far as I know, I have never used it.

But history, or English, or algebra, or phy. ed. are one thing. You may never need to know that the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620; you will probably not succeed or fail on the basis of a split infinitive; an ignorance of algebra may never handicap your career as an artist, or as a minister. But I can guarantee you one thing with absolute certainty, the time is coming when, whoever you may be, you will have to come to terms with your spiritual nature, with your knowledge of God or your lack of such knowledge. The time will come when you will want to know God and His reality more than you ever wanted to know anything else in your life. You will want, and you will need, something to lean on. And the great question is, "Will you have it?"

II

I read recently that more twins are being born these days than in years past. When a teacher told that to her class of third graders, one of the pupils responded, "I guess more twins are being born because little children are afraid to come into the world alone."

This is, in many ways, a frightening and a frightful world, but even though we come into it alone and go out of it alone, we do not need to live in it alone. We can discover something and Someone to lean on if we will discipline our lives to do so.

It was at such a time of aloneness and loneliness that the patriarch, Jacob, found God. We heard his story read to us a moment ago. At this time in his life, he was a relatively young man and a very lonely young man. The author of the Book of Genesis takes pains to point that out: "So Jacob was left alone, and a man (or angel) wrestled with him...til day-break."

This was Jacob's great spiritual experience in which he came to know God not as an abstraction, not as some kind of great "oblong blur" in the sky, but as a real and sustaining presence: "I have seen God", he said, "face to face and my life is spared." Jacob had found something to lean on. When life is hard, and cruel, and difficult, do you have something to lean on or are you like the young man who sat in my study and cried, "Help me! Help me! Help me!"

A few years ago, during a severe hurricane in Massachusetts, a young boy was sitting it out at home with his mother. The sky grew darker. Suddenly the lights went out. In the darkness, the mother heard the boy's muffled sobs. Trying to calm his fears, she said, "You might just as well calm down; after all, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Mother," he responded between sobs, "I know there's nothing we can do about it--but isn't there something we can do about us?"

Yes, there is something we can do about us. We can search for and discover something greater and stronger than ourselves to lean on, to rely on, to trust in.

In any time of great stress and danger, you will usually find men and women getting more religious. A chaplain who served in World War II once told me that after every enemy bombing, the attendance at chapel increased. It was so obvious that when the attendance dropped, men would joke, "Chaplain, we need another raid."

We often tend to belittle this increased religious feeling that occurs in times of suffering and danger. Yet it comes from something deep within the soul of every one of us. Unfortunately, if we have not developed our friendship with God in times of peace and tranquility, it is very unlikely we will have such a relationship in a time of stress and strain.

A man suffering from insomnia asked a friend how he managed to get to sleep so easily each night. "Do you count sheep?" he asked. "No," was the answer, "I talk to the Shepherd."

But what if you don't know the Shepherd? What if He's a stranger to you and you to Him? You can be like that young man who sat in my study, weeping, with no spiritual resources to lean on, or, you can be like that young man, paralyzed from the waist down, who never complains, who, with his great spiritual resources, has found a tie to the eternal God that gives him strength and courage and finally the victory.

III

I can tell you which kind of person the world needs. Let me illustrate it from history. As you all know, in ancient China, the people desired security from their enemies to the north so they built the Chinese wall we're all familiar with. It was so high no one could easily climb over it, so thick battering rams could not knock it down, but during the first one hundred years of its existence, China was invaded three times. How was it done? Each time, the enemy bribed the gate-keepers and the invading enemies marched through the gates. The walls were strong, it was the men who were weak.

Today we have a similar problem. The great wall is, in our case, perhaps, nuclear power. The weak link is the men and women without moral and spiritual character--hollow and timid men and women--who can see no greater value in life than the satisfaction of their own selfish desires and who, in a time of crisis, have nothing to lean on.

This morning, as these young people confess their faith in God and commit themselves to the Christian life, I hope all of us can honestly say that God is real to us, that we do have a living relationship with Him, and that Jesus Christ is the one whom, beyond all others, we seek to follow. If this is our faith and our commitment, we will be making ourselves part of the answer to the world's problem and not part of the problem itself.

One final story. A party of scientists were exploring an inaccessible region of the Alps in search of new flowers. One day they discovered through a field glass a flower of rare beauty. It lay in a place which could only be reached by someone being lowered down into a deep ravine on a rope. A native boy watching the activity was approached and offered a sum of money if he would allow himself to be lowered to pick the flower and then be pulled up.

The boy took one look at the dizzy depths and said, "Wait, I'll be back in a minute." He returned with an older man. Approaching the botanist, he said, "I'll go over the cliff now and get the flower if you let this man hold the rope. He is my father."

I hope you will always have a Heavenly Father holding on to the rope of your life, a Father who has promised, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."