

Life and Work

People on the Move 2

Climbing the Stairs

If you want to cross the country, you have to climb the stairs.

At Banavie, near Fort William, there is a place known as Neptune's Staircase. It is a series of eight canal locks, the longest staircase lock in the United Kingdom. Through these locks boats, ships and barges can pass, climbing one step at a time, to get from sea level up into the Caledonian Canal, twenty metres higher. Once into the canal, vessels can cross the country from Loch Linnhe on the west coast to Inverness on the Moray Firth. But to cross the country, they first have to climb the stairs.

Jacob was a man who had to cross some pretty difficult country, and there was a staircase at the start of his journey.

Jacob had comprehensively torn his own family apart. He had played up to the foolish favouritism of his parents; tricked his slow-witted twin Esau into giving up the rights of the first-born; lied to his father; deceived a dying man; and created such chaos that he was fleeing into exile alone, fearing for his life if his brother ever caught up with him. He was at such a low point, that he had nothing better than a stone for a pillow as he lay down to sleep. His future looked bleak, and his hope was fading.

It was then Jacob had a strange dream involving a staircase. (Genesis 28.10-17) The stairway joined heaven and earth, and in his dream he saw angels going up and down.

Just as the canal staircase at Banavie is about connecting people across the country, so Jacob's staircase was about connection. It told him that

when he felt most alone, most frightened and in his darkest times, God was with him. It told him that he didn't always have to stay in the situation he faced, but that change was possible. It told him that even as a trickster and a liar and the destroyer of his family, Jacob was not beyond the reach of God's love. It told him that God, who until then he had seen as the God of Abraham and Isaac was Jacob's God too. He wasn't leaving God behind but journeying with Him. The staircase showed Jacob that he and God were connected.

There was no instant transformation for Jacob. His was a lifelong journey of rebuilding and recovery. It had to happen in small, incremental steps. He still had the instincts of a trickster, but he learned to earn what he wanted through his efforts instead of taking from others by deception; he learned how to love and to deal with strained family relationships; he eventually learned his need of forgiveness and chose to ask for it. He never reached perfection. He didn't manage his family perfectly. He caused splits by mirroring the favouritism of his own parents. He kept making mistakes.

But Jacob had a ladder to climb and a journey to make. And it all started with realising that at the worst time of his life, when he felt totally alone, God was there with him. "Surely the Lord is in this place," he said, "and I did not know it!"