Most of you are probably familiar with the children's board game, Chutes and Ladders. The rules are pretty straightforward: You roll a dice, and advance that many positions. But depending on which square you land, you either get to stay there, or you get a free pass up a ladder to a more favorable position, or slide down a chute to a position behind where you were in the first place.

The objective of the game is to move higher and higher up the game board, increasing the numbered square that you're on, until you hit square number 100. The first one to arrive at this highest and greatest numbered square wins. It’s an easy concept. A game preschoolers can play. The rules and parameters are clear: Advancing and moving up is good and how you win; falling down and moving back is bad and how you lose.

There’s not much strategy to the game: simply, work your way up, hitting as many ladders as you can and avoid falling down the chutes. That’s it, it’s just that easy.

It’s tempting to treat life as if its rules were that easy. Setbacks are bad; steps forward are good. As long as we’re “moving up” and advancing, in our careers or our goals, as long as we’re making more and getting more, we’re “winning.” In fact, there was a slogan in the 80’s that made it onto t-shirts that said, “He who dies with the most toys, wins.”

I’d like to think we’ve all evolved a bit since the 80’s. And I think everyone in this sanctuary this morning knows that the rules of life, unfortunately, are not as clear and easy as the rules for Chutes and Ladders. More and higher are not always better.

In fact, studies show us that people who are making their way up the ladder are not always the happiest. That there are people who voluntarily fall down chutes and find themselves quite happy. It’s much harder to determine how to “win” at this game of life, and it’s much harder to determine what it means to win.

Similarly, it can be tempting to treat our lives of faith as if its rules were this easy. I grew up surrounded by a much more evangelical influence than we find here at The House of Hope, and “backsliding” was a thing pastors often talked about.

Growing up, I understood faith to be very much like a game of Chutes and Ladders. Going up the ladder, meant you were getting closer and closer to God. Falling down a chute, however, meant you were moving farther and farther away from God. And really, there was no neutral. If you weren’t actively moving up, you were backsliding. So, the life of faith was characterized much like an escalator headed down. And if you weren’t actively fighting that downward trajectory, you’d inevitably end up back at the bottom, far from God. Today’s scripture lesson from Genesis, however, tells a different kind of story.
Last week, we heard how Jacob stole Esau’s birthright. Between then and where we find him today, Jacob also steals Esau’s blessing. And he does so in a despicable, shameful way. He tricks Isaac, his dying father whose eye sight is failing, into thinking that he is Esau. He covers himself with the skin of a baby goat, so that when his father touches him, he feels hairy like Esau. It’s premeditated and manipulative, and it’s downright wrong.

The initial anguish from Esau then turns to anger, and he vows to kill his brother Jacob once their father dies. So that’s why Jacob finds himself in the wilderness. He’s alone with nothing but a stone to accompany him. And he decides to stop at this “certain place,” for no other reason than that the sun has set, and he needs to rest.

He is running for his life, alone in a strange place, this “quiet man” who preferred the domestic life over the nomadic, hunting life that Esau preferred. Jacob was the twin who enjoyed the comforts of home, the one who knew his way around a kitchen and wasn’t particularly outdoorsy. But now he is forced outside, exiled for the time being from the comforts of his home, sent away on a journey to literally keep him from being killed.

These are the consequences of his conniving actions, and I can’t argue that he doesn’t deserve them. But I imagine he felt pretty low at this point, pretty alone and uncomfortable. Maybe he even regrets some of his actions. It’s a “fall down the chute” kind of moment. And you would think, that at this moment, with all that he’s done, with how far he’s fallen, he would be as far away from God as possible. And he’d have no one to blame for that but himself. We find, however, that that is not the case. In fact, it is precisely at this moment, in his lowest of the low, that he is able to recognize the presence of God.

There are many theories about the ladder in Jacob’s dream. Some say it is a metaphor for our life of faith, and we find that we move up and down that ladder, closer to heaven one day, closer to earth another. Others say it represents human beings and how each and every one of us is both grounded here on earth and have a hand in the heavens. Still others assert that it shows how interconnected earth and heaven are, that there is always movement between these two spaces, and that there are “thin spaces” as Celtic traditions would put it, where we can experience the touching of heaven and earth.

The ladder is fascinating, there is much to conjecture and wonder about when it comes to Jacob’s ladder. But what I find most compelling about Jacob’s dream is not the ladder, but where we find God. God is not traveling up and down the ladder. Nor is God looking down on Jacob from on top of the ladder. Verse 13 tells us that the Lord stood beside Jacob, right there, next to him.

So contrary to what I was told or believed, our moving up the ladder of faith doesn’t bring us closer to God, nor does falling down the chute take us further from God. Whether we’re falling down or rising up, God is right there, beside us. In fact, sometimes it is in those lowest moments; those rock bottom moments where we feel the farthest from God that we are able to recognize God in a whole new way.
That’s not to romanticize or glorify the moments in our lives that are difficult because often they are just that, hard and awful. Nor is it to say that God causes those moments, for it is clear, at least in this story, that Jacob has caused this chain of events. It is to say, however, that there is nothing beyond the redeeming power of God. It is to say that God can redeem even the darkest, loneliest, ugliest parts of ourselves and of our lives. And it is to say, that sometimes God can break through these trying times and reach us in ways that were impossible in times of comfort and ease.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this about these dark moments in our lives, "New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

Until now, Jacob has had no recorded encounter with this God of his ancestors. But once he is forced out of his comfort zone, as he lies under the stars in the midst of his loneliness, in the midst of his fear, in the midst of his regret and uncertainty, in the midst of his darkness, he is able to finally recognize God’s presence in his life. Perhaps something about our own brokenness allows God’s light to shine in through those cracks. Jacob realizes this and says, “Surely the Lord is in this place- and I did not know it.”

Could God be in this place, or in the places of our darkest fears and uncertainties and we just don’t yet know it?

God can come to us in many different ways.
To Moses, God came in the fire of a burning bush;
To Elijah, God was not in the rushing wind, or the earthquake or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence;
To Samuel, God calls him in the night, awakening him from sleep;
But to Jacob, God comes in the form of a dream;
To Paul, on the road to Damascus through temporary failure of sight;
To John in a vision and revelation.
And God came definitely and fully for us and for all of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, so that we might know the Word made flesh.

So how does God come to you? Could God already be in this place, or in the places of our darkest fears and uncertainties, and we just don’t yet know it?

If God’s presence with us alone were not remarkable enough, we find that God is not only able to come along beside us to accompany us through both the good and the hard times of life, but that God is also able to transform us. This scheming trickster, Jacob has a hard time leaving his ways behind. I’m not sure he ever does that completely, but God is able to use him, too, to transform him from a selfish opportunist, to a faithful father of a nation.

And that’s the power of God’s presence and love in our lives. It never leaves us quite the same. It changes us, saves us, loves us into a better version of ourselves. And that’s God’s story, really. Taking ordinary things, like ourselves, and turning them into something extraordinary- into agents of love, peace, and justice.
And you know, ordinary things that become something more through the presence of God is precisely what the sacraments are. When we baptize, we use ordinary water. There was nothing special about the water that Clara brought over and that I placed on Jaxen and Abigail this morning. But it becomes something more, something remarkable and mysterious that serves as a sign and symbol of God’s presence here on earth, something beyond just what we see before us, and it is able to be a seal upon these children God’s grace. It is able to embrace them and claim them for God’s family.

Similarly, the bread and cup used for communion are also ordinary things, simple food items found in our daily lives. But they become something extraordinary through the presence of God. They become sustenance for us in our journey of faith; they connect us to believers in every time and place; they are a sign, a symbol, and a seal that points to something more than what we witness before us. In the sacraments, God transforms ordinary things to something beyond extraordinary.

Leonardo Boff who wrote a book called “Sacraments of Life, Life of Sacraments,” argues that everyday, ordinary objects in our lives can be and are actually sacramental. Not sacraments, but sacramental. He says, “Now that we are awake, we can see that the [whole] world is a sacrament of God.”

This happens to Jacob. When he awakes from his dream, he takes the rock on which he was sleeping on, an ordinary rock he just happened to find on the ground, and he pours oil on it, and it becomes a sacramental object. A mysterious reminder and sign and symbol of God’s presence and grace. This place would later become a site of worship, a place people would return with the hopes of experiencing God as Jacob did. Something as ordinary as a rock became so much more than that.

Our own lives are sacramental. We who have experienced something extraordinary have undergone transformation. That’s what God’s presence and persistent love does to us. We are sacramental, we point to something beyond ourselves that can allow others to experience something of God through us.

So perhaps we are that ladder in Jacob’s dream, that connection between earth and heaven that allows the world to glimpse God’s deep love for creation. That allows a broken and hurting humanity to connect with something divine and beyond our current realities of war, heartbreak, senseless death and pain. Perhaps we who are ordinary are extraordinary ladders for God. And perhaps God is calling upon us today to be used for that very purpose. Amen.