Abraham and Sarah had a son called Isaac, and Isaac had twin sons called Esau and Jacob. Esau was Jacob's elder brother, since he was born just a few minutes before Jacob. Jacob had always wished that he had been born first, since the firstborn son would have his father's flocks and herds when his father died. There was also the promise made to Abraham — the promise of a huge family, even more than the number of stars in the sky. Surely this promise would belong to the elder brother too? Jacob grew up to be a quiet man who sat near the tents where they lived. He spent a lot of time thinking about the promise God had made to his grandfather Abraham. It wasn't fair that he would be left out just because he was born a few minutes later than his brother.

Esau grew up to be an active man who loved to run and hunt. Esau did not really think about God's promise to Abraham at all. He was too busy going on hunting trips with his bow and arrows. Jacob and Esau were very different from each other. They even looked different — Jacob was small with smooth skin, Esau was big and tall and very hairy.

One day, when Isaac had grown very old and blind, he decided that the time had come to pray for his eldest son and give him a blessing for the future. So Isaac asked Esau to make him some delicious food and bring it to him in his tent, and then he would bless him. While Esau was out of the camp getting it ready, Jacob sneaked into his father's tent and pretended to be his brother Esau. He put goat skin on the backs of his hands, so that they felt hairy when his father touched them. Jacob fooled his father. Esau was furious! This blessing from Isaac was a very important moment and Jacob had stolen it from him. Jacob had to run away, because Esau was so angry. Jacob was afraid that Esau might kill him.

Jacob walked away by himself. He had never been by himself before. It was strange to be away from the family tents and not to hear people's voices and the sounds of the goats and the camels. He walked along in silence. 'I've always wanted my brother's place in the family,' he thought, 'but now I have no place at all. I am all alone. I wanted a share in Abraham's promise, but now I have no family and no home.' Evening came, and Jacob found himself the best place that he could to go to sleep. He lay down on the hard ground and put a smooth, flat stone under his head for a pillow. He really missed his tent and his soft warm bed made of goatskins, but he was so tired that he soon fell asleep.

Jacob began to dream. He saw a bright, warm light. He looked again, and he saw a ladder with its base on the ground where he was lying and its top stretching up towards the stars. Angels began to glide up and down the ladder, coming right down to where he lay on the ground. Then Jacob
heard a voice and he knew that God was speaking to him. The voice said, ‘I am the God of Abraham and the God of your father Isaac. You will be the father of a large family. You will have so many descendants that they will number more than the grains of dust on the earth and I will give them their own land to be their home. It will be a long time before this happens, but I will be with you all the time.’ A huge family and a new homeland – this was the promise that God had made to Abraham – and now he was saying the same thing to Jacob!

When Jacob woke up, he felt shocked and pleased. He also felt a bit frightened, because he had seen angels and heard the voice of God. He sat for a while and looked around him. ‘How awesome is this place!’ he said to himself. ‘It is the house of God, and for me it has been the gate of heaven.’ Jacob thought about the promise that God had made to him. He decided to use his stone pillow as a kind of altar. He set the stone upright in the ground and worshipped God there.

Jacob lived through many adventures – some of them exciting and strange, some of them sad. He lived for many years with his uncle Laban, looking after Laban’s flocks and herds. Jacob was very good at breeding sheep and goats, and so both Jacob and Laban became very rich. Jacob was not always an honest or a kind man, but he always tried to follow God’s path and he never forgot God’s promise. He became the father of 12 sons and each son gave his name to a tribe in Israel.

[We hang a ladder on the tree today. Just when Jacob thought he had lost everything, he dreamed of this ladder, saw angels and heard the voice of God. The promise which had come to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac came to him.]

A moment to wonder

I wonder whether Jacob felt scared when he went to sleep that night?

A prayer

As green as a healthy tree, the story of God’s love keeps growing.
We remember Jacob, who saw a ladder reaching up to heaven.
We pray for everyone who feels far from God today.
Amen.