

**“Surely the Lord is in This Place”:**

*7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost*

Gen. 28:10-19a; Ps. 139:1-12, 23-24;

Rom. 8:12-25; Matt. 13:31-33, 44-52

July 19, 2020

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Jacob, the younger of Isaac’s twin sons, was a trickster. With the cooperation of his mother, Rebekah, he managed to trick his father into giving him the blessing instead of the older, Esau. Of course, this strained the relations between the two brothers. When his dream took place, he was on his way to search for a wife among his mother’s relatives. It was a long journey, more than a day, so as the sun set, he search for a place to sleep. He found a stone for a pillow and lay down on it. While he was sleeping he had a dream in which he saw a ladder, maybe a stairway or a ramp, leading up to heaven. Angels ascended and descended between earth and heaven. The Lord appeared to him and assured him that the promise that had been given to Abraham and Isaac would be his as well. He would have the land and many descendants. When he awoke he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” He was afraid but said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” He set up the stone like a pillar, anointed it with oil and called it Bethel. He continued on his journey to find a wife.

This dream or vision is what we might call a theophany. All through Genesis, God appears in dreams. Joseph, son of Jacob, was also a dreamer, which not only saved his life but got him a top job in the Egyptian administration. People who could interpret dreams were exceptional, especially if their visions turned out to be accurate. The visionary poet and artist William Blake painted a picture in 1800 called “Jacob’s Ladder.” It depicts a circular staircase ascending to heaven with angels ascending and descending. Jacob has another name, Israel. He is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

So when Jacob proclaims, “Surely the Lord is in this place,” what does he mean? Bethel becomes a holy place because that is where God appeared to him. Many places around the world have developed special significance because someone had a vision there. Many Catholic shrines are built around the site of someone’s vision. In Celtic spirituality, they are called “thin places,” where the distance between God and creation is shortened. One of those places is Iona, on a small island that is part of the Hebrides Isles of Western Scotland. It was where St. Columba first landed when he came from Ireland to bring Christianity to Scotland in A.D. 563. The Iona Abbey, now restored, was built in

the 1200s. The modern Abbey and community was established in 1938 by Rev. George McLeod. Many of the ministers of the Church of Scotland are members of Iona. They do not spend a lot of time on the island, but use it mostly for retreats. They serve in many parts of Scotland and the world. The Iona Community is responsible for a lot of the renewal of the Church of Scotland, which we might consider the parent of our Presbyterian Church. Rev. J. Philip Newell, who for a time was the Warden of Iona, now serves as the companion theologian for the American Spirituality Center of Casa del Sol at Ghost Ranch, the conference center of the Presbyterian Church near Abiquiu, New Mexico. For me that is another “thin place” of the world. I have visited there many times and highly recommend it to others.

In this time when we are having to worship by electronic means, we may have trouble saying “Surely, the Lord is in this place.” But is not part of this lesson trying to teach us that God is in every place. That song by Avery and Marsh, “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together” should remind us that we are all the church. It is not a building, though God may be present there, but it is the congregation, the people who make up the church, wherever they are.

Another important part of Celtic spirituality is that God is present in all of us and in all creation. God cares for us as humans, but God cares for all the creatures and for the earth itself. Part of God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was that they would be given the land. But they were called to care for it and to share it with the stranger. We didn’t read the second lesson in the lectionary, but it is part of some of our liturgy. From Romans 8:19:25, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” God cares for all of creation, not only humans, and part of our calling is to care for creation. The first creation story in Genesis says that creation is good. Humans, in all our diversity, are created in God’s image. We are called to be good stewards of creation.

All of this, I think, is in contrast to the dispensationalist theology that was popular a few years ago when the “Left Behind” series of novels came out. It suggests that God is about to destroy the

creation, except for a few chosen people. There have been a few politicians who use this theology to justify destroying the earth for our own profit, such as Interior Secretary James Watt in the 1980s, who believed that the earth would soon be destroyed so we might as well use its resources while we can to make a profit. He put the economy over care of God's creation. Yet we may be called to sacrifice some of our lifestyle in order to preserve the earth for future generations. We cannot continue to burn fossil fuel at the rate we have done during the industrial age without the earth becoming warmer and disrupting the climate that supports life on earth. We already see signs of this happening, with more severe weather. Hurricanes are more intense and release more rainfall because the ocean is warmer, leading to evaporation of more water. The Arctic and Antarctic are melting at unprecedented rates, which contributes to sea level rise. This summer there were some readings in Siberia of temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. These warm temperatures also melt the permafrost, releasing more carbon into the atmosphere and contributing to wildfires. As the reading from Romans says, the creation is groaning, but we are not to lose hope. God is with us. The Spirit is calling us to creation care.

The Gospel reading from Matthew is a part of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. It is a parable of the kingdom and also a parable of grace. Though the farmer sowed good seed, thanks to an enemy, weeds became mixed with the wheat, and if the farm workers were to try to pull up the weeds, they would destroy the wheat crop as well. So they are instructed to let everything grow and then it can be sorted after the harvest. I know that I have trouble in my community garden plot sorting out the plants that I want and the weeds and with some of them, if I pull up the weeds, the good seed will come out too. We know that any human institution, including the church, has people in it who disagree and some who sow division. The parable suggests that we not excommunicate any one, but hope and pray that God will transform all our lives so that we can discern God's will and seek the justice and peace that will help to usher in the kingdom. In each of us there is a mixture of wheat and weeds, so God needs to sort out the good and bad in each of us. That is why we confess our sin in worship, and hopefully, we reflect on our own lives as we seek to draw closer to God's will. Sometimes we need to show a little forbearance toward others, even when we disagree. Likely in Jacob's dream as well, God was calling him to realize his weaknesses and to allow himself to be transformed. In another part of the story, Jacob has a dream of wrestling with an angel of God. Though his hip is thrown out of its socket, he receives God's blessing and is given a new name, Israel. Later he is reconciled with his brother.

So we see in all these stories that God is with us in all times and situations and places. God is calling us to care for our neighbors and make decisions that will lead to their welfare as well as our own. Maybe there is a message about how we cope with our present situation with the coronavirus in that call. Maybe we should wear masks even if they are a bit uncomfortable if it will protect our health and our neighbors' health. The session has already decided that the church will follow careful guidelines in reopening and resuming in-person worship. We may not be able to do all our favorite things at first. I love congregational singing, but apparently that is a great spreader of disease, so I may have to wait to do that when we get to in-person worship. Yet we know that God is in this place and we pray that we will make wise decisions to protect ourselves and our neighbors.

Let us pray: God be with us in these trying times. Help us to show our love for you and for our neighbors. Help us to care for your creation, preserving it for generations to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.