

Sermon Pentecost 8A
Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

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Do you have a holy place? Either one you’ve carved out for yourself, or a place that just holds a particular meaning for you? Maybe a place you go to talk to God or to remember someone you love? Some people call these “thin places,” points in space or in time where the division between heaven and earth doesn’t seem so far. One of those places for me has always been Lutheridge. When I’m there, I feel like I’m safely cradled in the hand of God. But even within that place, there is a spot that when I pass by even to this day, feels even more sacred than the rest.

It’s not the chapel, it’s not the prayer labyrinth, not even the reflection of the cross in the lake... it’s a rock. You see, every summer, I went to camp year after year. It was my happy place. The place that no matter what was going on in my life I knew for certain that God was with me. I started going up there for sleepaway camp as soon as I was old enough. And my plan was to keep going until the very last year I was eligible, and then return as a counselor. And I did. But that final year of senior high camp, I was not able to complete my stay.

My parents called and notified my counselors that I would have to leave early, because something terrible had happened back home. When they arrived, and told me what had happened, I ran. I don’t know why I thought running off would change things, But I just knew I couldn’t stand there and face the bad news. So I ran. I ran until I came to a place. and I stopped. And I stooped down on a rock that was there. and began to face the truth.

When we meet Jacob in the reading from Genesis today, He’s on the run. By this point in the story, Jacob has cheated his brother Esau twice - once out of his birthright, and then out of his father’s blessing, and his mother has had to deliver some harsh truth to him: “Your brother Esau’s not happy. In fact, if he

sees you again he just might kill you.” So the best suggestion Rebekah can make to Jacob is to run. So he tells his father Isaac that he’s leaving in search of a wife, in the land of Haran, the home of Rebekah’s brother, Laban.

And so he runs. He goes as far as he can until the sun begins to set, and then he stops, as the story says, “in a certain place.” I love when we hear this phrase in scripture, “a certain place,” because what it really means is exactly the opposite. When someone finds themselves in “a certain place,” what it really means is “no particular place” in fact, nowhere in particular at all.

Jacob stops in a place where there are no people, there’s no lodging, the best place he can find to lay down is the ground, and the best thing he can find to put under his head for a pillow is a rock. He’s nowhere...with no one. He got his brother’s birthright, he got his father’s blessing but that’s about all he’s got. He knows what he’s done, he’s had to face the truth. And now he’s alone in the dark, snuggling up with a rock. Is this where we get the phrase “rock bottom”?

But in this place...this “certain place,” in this rock-bottom nowhere land, God appears to Jacob. Just like he had appeared to his grandfather Abraham under the oaks of Mamre and his father Isaac on Mount Moriah. God appears to Jacob with a vision of angels ascending and descending on the “stairway to heaven.” But God wasn’t up on the ladder, he wasn’t high up in the heavens with the angels. Instead he was standing there beside him down on the earth.

And instead of speaking to Jacob of the stars of the sky, God re-frames the covenant prophecy to better reflect his current state and talks to him about the dust of the earth. “The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; your offspring shall be [as numerous as] the dust of the earth... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”

Even in this place, even with the deceit he has perpetrated, even now, on the run from the consequences of his actions, God’s promise persists. The covenant God established with Abraham - that he would be their God and that they would be his people - that through this family, this wandering, wondering, trusting, scheming, cheating, dysfunctional family - all the families of the earth would be blessed. The covenant stands, even here, even now. God assures Jacob that no matter where he runs He cannot escape the promise. “I am with you,” God says. “I will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you.”

Still to this day, when I pass by the rock that still sits in that same spot at Lutheridge, that place has such meaning for me. I can almost feel its presence when I’m close by. It is a place marked by a moment. And that moment wasn’t good, but that doesn’t make it any less holy. Because the further I’ve gotten from that moment, the more I’ve been able to see the ways God was present with me holding me there in the palm of his hand preparing me to bear it, strengthening me through it.

That place has become one of those “thin places” for me. A place where the distance between heaven and earth doesn’t seem so far. A place I can point to and say with certainty just as Jacob said: “Surely the presence of Lord was with me in this place.” And hear God’s promises in return: “I am with you. I will keep you. I will not leave you.”

When Jacob woke from his sleep, he took the rock where he had laid his head, stood it up as a monument and exclaimed “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” This is when this “certain place” gets on the map. He names it “Beth-el,” meaning “House” or “Dwelling place of God” and it remains a place where the Israelites returned to worship God for centuries.

When I was working on today's sermon, I looked up images of "Bethel" in ancient Israel to see what it looks like. And it is...not impressive. It's dry, scrubby land scattered with rocks. But that is kind of perfect. "Beth-el," the "House of God," the place of the renewal of the covenant, the place pronounced by Jacob to be "so awesome" is really nowhere special. And isn't that so often how things go? Isn't it in those not-so-special places that God seems to show up so clearly? Isn't it in those not-so-put-together moments in our lives that become for us those "thin places," places we can turn and point and say *There* - that is where I felt the presence of God so definitely?

A pastor friend once shared with me how she once heard the voice of God speaking to her so clearly, telling her that she should follow the call to go into the ministry, and how utterly annoyed she was that this revelation of the voice of God came to her...in a McDonalds. Why did it have to be there, God?

Of course, we come to places like this to surround ourselves with the sights and sounds, smells and tastes of the holy...to surround ourselves with the people of God... And of course God is here with us, in this "House of God." But sure enough, if we have our eyes open, we will see God in those less-glamorous places, We will hear God in those less-obvious times We will encounter God in those other less tidy moments of our lives even when we're on the run from our choices from our deceit or from dysfunctional relationships.

This summer, you may feel the pressure to "make memories." And I'm sure with the travel plans, the family visits and time off, you will. But don't forget just to notice when holy moments, those holy places crop up, even in the unplanned, unscheduled unchoreographed times. In the places in-between, on the way, in the silence, or even at your lowest. Keep your eyes open for the "Beth-El"s that can appear out of nowhere. The dwelling places of God that appear in the least likely of locations. Notice them, mark them, remember them, share them. Even if it's unplanned, uncomfortable or even painful. From those places, hear God's promise for you: "I am with you... I will keep you wherever you go... I will never leave you."