

## “How Awesome Is This Place!”

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - July 19, 2020

Genesis 28:10-22 ~ Romans 8:12-25 ~ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Many years ago, John and I took our two children to Paris. They were very young at the time and had never traveled out of the country. Children can be hard to impress, especially when their own parents are trying to do the impressing, but this was Paris for goodness sake. We took as much of it in as we possibly could, and they were good travelers ... nary a complaint about the steady stream of museums and cathedrals. We wanted to avoid the distressing number of McDonalds that popped up far too often, and it was hardly a hardship to substitute lunches of flaky croissants filled with delicious ham and wonderful cheese. As reward for their following my exhausting itinerary with such good humor, I told them they could choose to do whatever they wanted on our last day. That evening I put all my guidebooks on the floor and let them pour over them. I was casually pointing out some things that I thought might be a great Parisian experience ... like a tour of the Rodin museum or strolling along the Left Bank ... when they both spied it ... Disneyland Paris! Nooo! I wanted to scream ... not *that* ... not *that* on our last day! But a promise is a promise, so we boarded a train early the next morning and off we went. They could hardly wait to get there, and their excitement was contagious ... before long I got over my self-righteousness ... because I loved hearing their enthusiasm ... “Look! There’s Pirates of the Caribbean!” “Look, there’s Space Mountain!” “Look! there’s Sleeping Beauty’s Castle ... this is just like home!” Not exactly the way I had hoped to immerse them in French culture, but our son, who was especially nonchalant in those days, summed it up nicely ... and rewarded me supremely with these words ... “Awesome, Mom! Awesome!”

Some places on the planet have a way of taking hold of us. New York City had that effect on me. So did Rome. Chicago. Boston. San Francisco. I’m a city girl. The busy streets get my heart pumping. But I love nature’s scenic wonders, too. The Grand Canyon ... Big Sur ... the Outer Banks ... the red rocks of Sedona ... the Big Bend ... all these places fill me with awe. And it’s not just the urban pulse or the visual beauty of a place that can grab us. History does it, too. The ruins of Athens ... the monuments of Gettysburg ... the shores of Normandy ... to stand in places where others have stood before us at critical moments in the human drama can be incredibly moving.

But of all places, the places that amaze me most are sacred spaces. It may be a church or a temple or some kind of shrine where people regularly meet God, but just as often those spiritual centers were built where they were because *the place* has a numinous quality about it. The Celtic tradition calls them “thin places,” the idea being that in these mysterious locations the usual dividing wall between the human and the Divine ... between the temporal and the eternal ... between earth

and heaven ... is unusually thin. It is a boundary place where the two planes meet. It is the holy space where God meets humanity. We learn in our Hebrew Scripture passage that Jacob's journey took him to such a thin place when he didn't expect it.

But this is also a story about sacred times ... moments in our lives when we are especially susceptible to the still small voice of God. Jacob came to this holy place at just such a moment in his life ... a time of transition and risk. After tricking his twin brother Esau out of his birthright and cheating him out of his father's blessing, Jacob was sent by his mother out of the country to find a wife back home in Haran among their own people. He was running for his life, and he didn't know when or whether he would ever be back.

It's hard to feel sorry for him because he was getting what he deserved. His whole life had been lived only for himself. So, he came to that place at that moment, and laid down exhausted, with his head on a rock. That's when he had this dream of a ladder. The Hebrew word is *sulam*, which actually means a ramp or a stairway. This stairway was divided for two-way traffic. More likely, the image Genesis has in mind is one of those ancient temples called ziggurats, platformed pyramids with central steps leading to the top where the priests of Babylon went up to meet their gods.

What's this ladder business all about? As one commentator put it, "This vision has been the victim of many interpreters." I like Walter Brueggemann's observation that the intersection of critical time and holy place leads Jacob to the discovery that the God of his forbears is a personal and relational God who wants to make covenant with *him* ... who is with *him* on the journey ... with *him* through the danger ... with him to bring *him* to safety. Jacob thinks he is alone and in danger, but he discovers there is constant traffic between heaven and earth ... not "that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world" ... but that "God's on the earth and all hell's broken loose!"

I think that we spend most of our lives either leaving our "safe place" or trying to get to our "safe place" but whichever it is, we are mostly in the limbo "between places" .... where we are on the move, and without control ... where we're traveling through insecure, risky in-between places. Maybe the "thin places" are often the "in between places" ... where we are not in control and therefore God can get to us. This time we have been living in recent months would certainly qualify.

This is surely a story about the God who meets us in the unexpected places and the unguarded moments of our lives. We believe that God is everywhere and that there is no place you can go where God is not. "Where may I go from your spirit?" asks the psalmist.

Was Jacob seeking God? Perhaps. Even if we ignore God the rest of the time, most of us turn to God in our most difficult moments ... when we are afraid ... when we are in danger ... when our need is deep and we have to admit we've come to the end of our resources. We want to bargain. We want to appease God in case God is mad at us. We want God to help us right this minute.

But, as Paul Tillich said, God is not our "cosmic bellhop." God doesn't act at our command ... by our control ... and according to our timing. To pray ... to seek God ... is to place yourself in God's control and to trust God's timing. God knows where and when and how to answer our prayers. God knows best. As Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8).

Jacob had come to a desperate moment. Whether he was seeking God or not, he was not aware God was with him. Until he came to some godforsaken spot ... or so he thought ... and fell asleep, exhausted.

Then Jacob dreamed, and God came to him ... in a place where he didn't expect it ... at a moment when he didn't expect it. We can't always see God, but God always sees us. God is always more aware of us than we are aware of God. God is always nearer to us than we are to God. And God is always working to our benefit, long before we are aware or focused or even praying for God's help.

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. (Gen 28:13-15). This is when Jacob discovers that this "God of his fathers and mothers" who has been a history lesson to him ... a story of days gone by ... is his own personal God who loves him and wants to make covenant with him.

Jacob wakes up. For the first time in his life he wakes up! "Surely the Lord is in this place ... and I did not know it!" he says. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God ... this is the gate of heaven." And he is afraid. Why is Jacob afraid? Naturally, he's afraid because he has wandered into this mysterious holy ground and the Almighty is there with him. He's in God's space, and we all know that calls for a different kind of behavior. It's not an ah-ha moment, it's an uh-oh moment ... Jacob wakes up and says, "Yikes! This is God's space. I hope I didn't make God mad by lying on God's rock!"

But I think Jacob is also afraid because for the first time he realizes that while he was mucking about in the world looking out for number one, the real NUMBER ONE had a higher calling for him to be about ... that what had seemed to Jacob to be just the mundane ways of getting by, actually had huge, eternal consequences.

He could never see his life the same way again. Jacob makes his pillow a sacred monument. And he makes promises to God. He promises to come back to his father's house to continue the great work of salvation that God began in Abraham. He promises to make this place God's special holy place. He even promises to tithe, to give one tenth of everything he has to God's work!

When God takes hold of you, when you realize God is with you and watching over you, when you understand your life is not just dust in the wind ... but a part of God's eternal good work ... and that you were made for more than gathering toys and dressing in the latest fashion ... you are never, ever the same. That's what happened to Jacob in an unexpected place at an unguarded moment. He met his destiny. He met his God.

This is an awesome place, too. We would never have time for me to tell you how *thin* this place is ... how many times God has done things here that none of us expected ... how many people God has taken hold of and never let go. But I will say because I have seen it happen before, *this* could be the place ... and *this* might be the time when God takes hold of you. It's time to wake up.

May we pray?

Almighty, everlasting God, You see us. We see our lives as ordinary, our actions as insignificant, and our inactions as harmless. All the while you are calling us to your greatness, to assert your justice against the powers of this world, to assert your love against the hatred of this world, and to make every place and every moment and every person holy, filled with your presence. Wake us up to the awesome wonder and beauty and majesty of this life you have given us and you will be our God and we will be your people in Jesus blessed name. Amen.