

Sermon preached July 20, 2014
Center Church
Hartford, Connecticut
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Genesis 28:10-19

“Holy Places”

I love the story and the imagery of this morning’s text from Genesis—the hymn we’ll sing a little later was one of the first I sang in Junior Choir and it left a lasting impression—but at first glance the lesson doesn’t appear to offer much in the way of practical advice. Yet Jacob’s experience at what would become known as Bethel, as unique as it was, does have real relevance. When Jacob awakes from his dream of the ladder to heaven and of God’s blessing and sets up a stone to mark the place where he encountered the presence of God, he is revealing to us something about the importance of holy places in the life of the believer.

Now to say one place is more holy than any other would seem to fly in the face of our belief that God is everywhere—which also happens to be the most convenient excuse for those who don’t like coming to church. And while that is most certainly true, God *is* present and available everywhere, human beings are shaped not only by the moment in which we live, by the passage of time, but by place as well. God may be omnipresent, everywhere, but our capacity to be open to that presence isn’t as complete. Space, where we are, affects our mood, our capacity to work and think and create and relate, as well as our ability to hear the still small voice, to pray, to receive God’s grace. Where we are matters.

Having said that, these days it seems the most obvious holy places are churches and chapels and synagogues and mosques, locations that people of faith have designated as places of worship, where one can draw near to God. In fact, not long after Jacob’s dream there, Bethel was designated a holy place for Jews, and a famous sanctuary was erected around the stone Jacob set up, all on the basis of Jacob’s encounter with God in that place. This plot of earth in the City of Hartford, and the meetinghouse which stands on it are holy places because various generations of this church family intentionally created and defined them as sanctuary, and over the years subsequent generations, including this one, have built on that tradition and affirmed that belief by invoking God’s presence and believing in the sacredness of the place. Houses of worship are holy places.

There’s another, second kind of holy place, quite a bit less structural. Jesus said that wherever two or three gather in his name, there he would be in the midst

of them. When believers come together, their faith creates a space in which God's presence can be encountered. Communities are portable holy places.

But when Jacob awoke from his dream and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" he's revealing a whole other dimension to the notion of a holy place. He says, "How awesome—holy—is this place!" Certainly that location was not a physical sanctuary: Jacob was out in the wilderness between Beer-sheba and Haran, sleeping on the ground with a stone for a pillow. And neither was Jacob in community; indeed, he was not only without company, but he was wandering, literally and figuratively. Having cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, Jacob's mother urges him to take off before Esau can get even. His father Isaac wants him to go to Haran to find a wife, but in truth, Jacob is running away. He is wandering alone.

Though Judaism was years away from defining the place as holy, and though Jacob was in solitude, nonetheless he had a profound personal experience of God: in the image of his dream, the gulf between heaven and earth was spanned, and God spoke to Jacob, telling him that he was now the bearer of the promise that God would be with the people of Israel.

We are not patriarchs or prophets, but Jacob's experience at Bethel reminds us of a *spiritual* truth and offers us a *practical* challenge. The truth is that individuals do experience God's presence in places that are particular to each. In addition to this church and others that have been our spiritual homes, in addition to the presence of God in gatherings of believers, God does come to us in our own holy places, places unique to each of us and our individuality. The challenge is to recognize them, to honor them and to seek out whatever blessing God intends for us through them.

For you, where is Jacob's ladder? Where is the distance between you and God, between heaven and earth bridged? The place where Jacob slept was called Luz, but Jacob renamed it Bethel, which means, "dwelling place of God." Where is your Bethel? Is there, or has there ever been, a place, a location in your life where you go and God's presence seems more real? A place all your own where your everyday resistance and anxiety diminishes? A location where you seem to see things more clearly, where you can pray more easily, where impossibilities like forgiveness and hope feel more possible?

For me, there is such a personal holy place. It is Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. You might not think a cemetery an inspirational

location, but as with most personal holy places, *this* one is the product of the unique influences in *my* life. Because both sides of my family are from the Boston area, I've been past and through Mount Auburn all of my life, it is a constant. It is a place of great natural beauty, of artistic and theological expression, of historical interest, of powerful emotions. For me it is an island of otherworldliness: the moment I step through the tall iron gates I am transported into a space that is timeless and dreamlike and much how I imagine heaven to be.

As a child the silence of the still ponds and the rolling hills and the great elms and willows and maples was awesome. One moment we were on busy city streets, avoiding trolley cars, the next in this vast landscaped park. When I was a young adult, and then in seminary in Newton, I would drive or ride my bike or take the bus to Mount Auburn and walk for hours. The gravestones told stories of lives and expressed a great variety of beliefs about God and Christ and life after death; the faces of countless stone figures wore expressions of sadness and joy and wonder, and all around the birds and the animals and the seasons went about their business; death and life were one, and it was OK. Something in that space spoke to me, shouted to me, of eternity. God's presence became vivid to me most times I went there. I couldn't help but be humbled in that space; to see my true place in the larger scheme of nature and human life; to feel and see the incredible blessing that was my life. My problems were never solved on those visits, but their intensity would diminish, and I often came to unforced resolution on many issues and problems I couldn't get a handle on outside, decisions I look back on now and see the hand of God leading me—much as I imagine Jacob felt at Bethel the morning after.

And of course, as is often the case, we want others to experience the wonders of our holy places. So I enthusiastically brought friends along with me, hoping they'd see what I saw. One couldn't get over how dull a place Mt. Auburn was, another said it all seemed a bit too melancholy and ghoulish, and while still another friend appreciated why the place might have appeal, I couldn't make it for him the way it was for me. Certain places, it seems, are holy in the eyes of the individual believer.

So, again, where is your Bethel? In all those times away from church and away from others, where does God dwell most clearly for you? Where is the divide between heaven and earth most narrow? Is it somewhere you were once upon a time and to which you have not since returned, or a place you find yourself every day? Is it a particular walk you take, a museum you frequent, a garden you tend, a town you visit? Is it as dramatic as the Grand Canyon or the Atlantic

Ocean, or as ordinary as a particular tree or patch of earth or rock that has special meaning known only to you? Is it a room in a house, a secret retreat, a front porch, a thinking chair, a stretch of road down to the shore, a walk around Bushnell Park? The musician Frank Zappa once described himself as a sculptor of air because sound waves rearrange air space in a room in a unique, reproducible way, so from that perspective, hearing a piece of music is locating yourself in a very particular space. Is it music that creates your holy place?

Some of you, I'm sure, already have your answer to these questions. But it's important for all of us to remember that part of discipleship is taking time to recognize and to seek out the holy places God provides. Too often the pace of life makes us think our own church, the formal sanctuary is the only holy place in our lives, the only place God dwells, and we stop being attentive everywhere else; or, we take the idea of God being present everywhere too far, and assume every place is a holy place, which only dilutes the sacred. But Jacob's experience, while dramatic and pivotal for the people of Israel, is one God provides for each of us in one form or another. In that one place, at Bethel, God made Jacob understand that he mattered, that he would participate in God's promises, and so it is for us.

One of the requirements for the faithful Muslim is one pilgrimage to Mecca in the course of a lifetime. We Christians have largely turned away from the notion of pilgrimage, substituting our attendance at weekly worship. But we all have holy places of our own, and we need to discipline ourselves to go there, even if it is an effort, for the pilgrimage can be as important as what happens when we arrive. At our holy places, we can't always predict that the experience will be as full or as grace-filled as before; but in our going, in the pilgrimage, we are acting out with our bodies the good intentions and desires of our hearts, demonstrating to God that we seek the blessing of Bethel once more, and in the process, opening ourselves to new dreams and visions and encounters.

Jacob's ladder is a simple but powerful symbol that God reaches out, assures us of our place in God's care, and sends us forth with purpose. *Wherever* that experience of presence and peace and confidence happens to you, name that place as holy, and honor it, faithful that God will be revealed there again.