

Sermon July 17, 2011

St John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain

Anne Mansfield Minton

This passage from Genesis may be among our most familiar Bible stories. Western art and literature are full of images of and references to Jacob's ladder. And, you can see that ladder, can't you, looking like something from Home Depot, firmly planted between earth and the clouds, rising up to heaven. And, there is lots of activity on this ladder. Messengers, aka angels, moving up and down. Since I am a Type A personality, it delights me to know that there is so much activity going on and that heaven is a "happening" kind of place! God is sending and receiving messengers like the CEO of a multinational corporation! That's the visual image that comes up when I hear this passage read.

But this passage from Genesis not only evokes a picture of a ladder with lots of "to-ing and fro-ing," it also reminds me of a camp song. I can vividly remember sitting around a campfire, full

of roasted marshmallows, (me, not the campfire), resting on rather bumpy ground, and singing with great gusto if slightly off key: “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Of course, this is a Christian hymn about being soldiers of the cross and loving and serving Jesus and not at all what the author of Genesis was trying to convey. However, it is a strong memory of a song about the intentions of my heart- to love and serve Jesus- and the need for me to climb this ladder, one rung at a time, each rung going higher, higher. This ladder was for me about being a disciple and about the effort required to carry my cross and to keep putting one foot above the other to ascend Jacob’s ladder.

These are the two things that immediately come to mind when I hear this passage from Genesis. An image of a ladder. And a memory of song. But, what was the point that the author of this passage wanted to make? Well, in the first place it’s not really a ladder. It is actually a ramp or a staircase, similar to structures on the ziggurats of Babylon. But even if it is not a ladder, it still is about access to heaven- a structure which provides a link. Turns

out that heaven and earth are not so far away after all- not far distant realms.

There is lots of activity in this passage. So, what is going on? Jacob is on a journey from Beer-Sheba in what is today southern Israel just east of Gaza, to Haran, in what is today southeastern Turkey near the Syrian border. I have been to Haran- in the middle of the desert, hotter than you can even imagine! But, hot and desolate as it is today it is enormously important. From Haran Abraham and his family were called by God to go to the Promised Land. Haran was where the journey began. Now Jacob is reversing the order and returning to the point where his family started. But he is not there, is he? He is no place right now. On a journey, traveling between one place he knew and another place he knew about. But, he wasn't actually in either place right now.

And, the story gets more complicated. Jacob is running away. He is going into exile. Jacob has deceived his father, cheated his brother and snatched his birthright. Jacob is on the run. He is a no-person who finds himself in a no-place. We have

some experience of this, don't we? Not sure who we are or where we are. These days it's not unusual to ask someone about their job and have them say that they are between jobs right now. In an in-between place. Or to ask someone about their life and family and have them say that they are between relationships or finding their way through a difficult emotional landscape right now. Or people will say that they are going through a transition, personal or professional which has led them to a place different from where they started and different from where they used to be and they are trying to find their way to wherever they are meant to go.

So Jacob is between things. In a place that has no particular significance, religious or otherwise. Just a place to stop for the night in the midst of a long journey. Now, notice that Jacob encounters God when he is asleep and dreaming. Jacob has lost all control. He is clearly NOT in charge! This is the setting in which he finds God, or more accurately, where God finds Jacob. And God tells this person in exile, traveling between one place and another place that God will be with him. That God will give him

an identity and a people and a land. That God will travel with him and bring him back to the land and give him a destiny and a future. And God promises that God will remain with him until all that God envisions for Jacob will be accomplished.

I will not dwell on the political ramifications in our own day of God's promise of the land to Jacob and his descendants. And on the problem that Palestinian Christians encounter when they find the Bible promising other people their land. Nor on the polemic here about Bethel being a good place to worship over against the new-fangled temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem! All those themes can be found here, too. But, for today it may be enough to savor God's presence and promise to a man who is lost to himself, and on a journey. And has fallen asleep. When he awakes he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!"

Have you had a moment like that? A sudden awakening? A startling realization that when you thought you were lost you had already been found? That when you thought you had no home you

are promised one? That when you thought you were on a journey alone that you had a companion?

We can spend a lot of time focusing on what Jacob did in this story. And how much activity there was up and down that ladder, and how many rungs we ought to be climbing. But, for today, let us give ourselves over to awe at meeting God when we most needed God. At being cherished and protected when we were most vulnerable. At being in the presence of the Holy One even while we slept. At worshiping God when we've lost most of our control. And simply come, simply stand, simply gaze. For today that may well be enough!

May God be praised. Amen.