

HOLY SPACES, HOLY PLACES (Gen. 28:10-19a)

Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges

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What is the holiest place you have ever been? If you think back over your life, when were the times when you felt God's presence most deeply? Where were you? What were you doing? And what was it about that place that spoke to you, told you God was there?

For some of us the place we are picturing is a church, somewhere specifically set aside as a house of God. For others of us, the spot we remember is not so much a place, but a "space." It may be somewhere in nature, where we have felt God's handiwork in the abundance of creation all around us.

However, God can also be found in the most unexpected places, the rather mundane or common ones in life. One of the things I did in my ministry in the Chicagoland area was lead worship services twice a month on a Memory Care floor in a healthcare center. People on a "memory care" floor are those with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. They have experienced extreme loss of cognition. For anyone who has been in a medical center, you are familiar with the sights, sounds and even smells of such a place. Things can be a bit chaotic with frequent outbursts many people consider disruptive. But I can tell you that during worship in the Memory Care Unit, some amazing, godly things happened.

For instance, there is the story of Charles, an 86-year old former pilot, lawyer and farmer. He was an interesting man who decided when he was raising his children to leave the wealth of the suburbs and return to his roots and family values, moving his family out to a country farm. Charles had advanced Alzheimer's disease and was confined to a wheelchair and no longer spoke. He had been an avid reader in life so often during worship he would flip through the pages of the hymnal quickly, one after another.

A meaningful time in the service was always the offering of the peace. For people who are often touched only clinically, the touch of a friendly handshake was

most welcomed. I remember the first time I offered my hand to Charles. I said the words, "Peace be with you." Charles looked at me, crinkled his forehead and took his fingers, moving them in a circle around my face. Now I don't know what Charles was trying to say, but the word that came to my mind was "confusion." After that, each time we shared the sign of peace, I would initiate the handshake with Charles and he learned to receive it.

About one year later, an amazing thing happened. We were at worship and I took Charles' hand gave him the usual greeting. Clear as day he said, "Thank you." I stood there shocked! I looked around to see if anyone else had heard—they had not. I could not believe my ears. Later that day I saw Charles' wife and I told her what had happened. She too was amazed and after that she started to come to our worship services regularly.

So every two weeks following I would offer Charles the peace, waiting to see if we would receive yet another response. He would give me his hand for the handshake, but no words followed. His wife and I had about given up hope and then three months later, something even more incredible happened. As I made my way around the room offering the peace, when I reached Charles, he looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I love you." His wife who was sitting next to him looked up with tears streaming down her cheeks, the nurse who was passing out medications came over in tears as well, and I could feel my own eyes welling up. We all knew we were on very holy ground that day. Charles died a few months later and to my knowledge these were the last words he spoke.

What makes for holy ground? In our Old Testament reading today, Jacob finds God in a place he never imagined. The story takes place at a time when Jacob has been instructed by his father Abraham to leave his family and home in order to journey and find a wife. It must have been hard for him to leave everything and everyone he knew, but he followed his father's instructions. So Jacob sets out and makes his way, until the sun starts to set. He finds a place to camp for the night. Now the Bible says nothing about this being a special place, just a "certain place."

And it was probably pretty primitive for Jacob takes a stone, using it as a pillow, and goes to sleep.

But in that very place, something awesome happens...Jacob has a dream. He sees angels climbing up and down stairway. And then God is there, standing right before him saying, "I am giving you this ground on which you are sleeping...I am with you and will protect you wherever you go." So vivid is the dream that Jacob awakens with a startle and exclaims, "Truly, God is in this very place and I did not even know it!"

This realization of God's holy presence seems to have both awakened and shaken Jacob, for he is afraid. As Eugene Peterson in "The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language" puts it, we can picture Jacob whispering in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's house. This is the Gate of Heaven." This is the place where God comes to earth.

The first thing Jacob does out of reverence is to take the stone he slept on and set it up as a marker of this holy place. But then Jacob does something else, the part of the story that has been left out of our reading today: Jacob makes a vow to God. Again Peterson paraphrases Jacob's vow this way, "If God stands by me and protects me on this journey which I am setting out, keeps me in food and clothing, and brings me back in one piece to my father's house, this God will be my God. This stone that I have set up as a memorial pillar will mark this as a place where God lives. And everything you give me, I'll return a tenth to you." After seeing the vision and becoming aware of God's presence, Jacob awakens to new possibility and changes his life. He dedicates part of it to God.

When we have our own visions of the Divine presence, some of the same things that happened to Jacob happen to us. We are left in awe and amazement that God is right here, right now, in this very place. Like Jacob, we might use words of exclamation or we may be left absolutely speechless. And we change, if even briefly. If you think back to that holy space you remembered, most likely you were touched by God's Spirit at that time. On that sacred ground wherever it was, you

stopped for at least a moment, sensing God's bigger picture and being pulled outside of yourself. These special, sacred places leave a mark on us.

Now one thing really throws me in this story. And that is that while Jacob found a specific place to anoint, I wonder what space or place is not holy? If God is always with us, ever-present, is there a place where God is not? Here at St. John of the Cross, we are blessed with a beautiful church and we feel God's presence here, but I think none of us would argue that God exists outside this sanctuary as well. The fact is that God is everywhere: in our homes, our workplaces, the factories, our schools. We just often forget. Indeed God is present in each and every place, if only we look close enough.

But this is not always easy, for there are times in our lives when darkness seems to overshadow the light. There are places where the Holy does not seem to exist. In our gospel reading today, it may seem unfortunate, but Jesus says that the weeds and wheat must grow together. As much as we might want to, it is impossible to separate the good from the evil. We cannot simply get rid of people that challenge us or difficult situations. And we must not forget that sometimes we are the ones who rub others the wrong way. Jesus tells us that we must be patient, endure, all growing and thriving together until the holy harvest.

The reading from Romans gives us some kind of a clue as to how to do this, even in the darker moments of life. Paul advises us not to focus on our sufferings of this world, but on the glory of the next. When we do this, we live differently. The present day becomes more bearable, knowing that a time will come when we will shine as bright as the sun.

I believe another big help are the holy moments God sends us in life. Like Jacob's ladder, these visions bridge the gap between heaven and earth. They offer us just a glimpse of God's great glory, a foretaste of the "holy harvest." When we place our hopes on this vision, we find our faith strengthened and renewed.

As Christians we are called to do more than just recognize God around us. We have a role in helping to create and sustain holy places each and every day. We do

this in the ways we act, the things we say and do, in how we treat other people. As we leave this place today, may we be mindful of the kinds of spaces we create. For every place is holy. May we make room for the Spirit to live and move and have its being in all times and all places here on earth.