

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
Barboursville, West Virginia
June 28, 2020

Prelude

Call to worship

We worship the God who inhabits our world and indwells our lives.

We need not look up to find God...

we need only to look around...

within ourselves...

beyond ourselves...

into the eyes of another.

We need not listen for a distant thunder to find God...

we need only to listen to the music of life...

the words of children...

the questions of the curious...

the rhythm of the heartbeat.

We worship the God who inhabits our world,

who indwells our lives.

Hymn How Firm a Foundation

Text: John Rippon; Music: American folk melody

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in God's excellent word!

What more can he say than to you he has said,
to you, who for refuge, to Jesus has fled?

"Fear not, I am with thee, O, be not dismayed,
for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I cause thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

The soul, that on Jesus, has leaned for repose,
I will not. I will not, desert to its foes.
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no, never forsake.”

Prayer of Confession

God, you know us better than we know ourselves.
You know our thoughts,
our weaknesses,
our sins.
and you love us still.
Forgive us when we don't believe such love is true or possible.
When we wonder how you could love us just as we are,
when we forget our intricate construction,
that we are fearfully and wonderfully made... in Your image!
Remove from our minds every thought that keeps us from You.
Break down the walls,
push aside the pride,
and help us trust anew.
You know our hearts
and You love us still. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Nothing is impossible with God.
There is no place you can go.
No end of the earth to which you can run.
There is nothing on earth or beyond death
that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
You are forgiven and freed to live in God's infinite love, grace, and peace. Amen.

Scripture Reading Genesis 28: 10-19a

The Morning Message “Building Spiritual Cairns”

Summer is travel and vacation season. For some, the beach beckons. For others, the great trees of the forest wave them into the respite of cool and shade and musical streams and waterfalls. For still others, it's a time to take the kids and grandkids to historic places, landmarks where something important happened in the life of the nation or state, or family.

Ed remembers the summer his parents took him to every county in the state, where they stood him by the black and white historic marker sign and snapped a picture for their photo album. A friend of mine took a trip out west recently and you could feel the sense of awe in her Facebook posts as day after day she filled it with pictures of snow in July, the magnificent Rockies and Mount Rushmore.

Memories are important to us. Can you close your eyes and remember your first car? Your first date? The day you walked across the stage to receive your diploma? The feel of a newborn baby in your arms?

A wave of nostalgia can wash over us at the thought.

But, not all memories are good ones and we have a tendency to avoid or shove out of sight those things that remind us of painful times. One day Sarah Beth and I were driving thru Milton, and passed the old middle school. I pointed toward the building and said something like, “We’re in your old stompin’ grounds. You had a great time there.”

To which she whipped her head around to face me and said something like, “Eat rocks! I hated that place!”

And then there are the thin places, the holy moments of our lives, when the distance between this world and the next is as close as a whisper. We know that God is always near, but there are holy moments when the gossamer veil is lifted and we are standing in God’s presence in an intimate way.

In today’s Genesis text, Jacob receives a vision, a holy visitation, following an act of cunning and cowardice. He has hurt his brother and father in his selfishness. His cover story is that his mother has sent him off to find a decent wife, but, in truth, Jacob is running scared, as if putting distance between himself and his despicable behavior will save him.

On his way toward Haran, Jacob came to a place to rest for the night. Scripture says he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

And he dreamed there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching into heaven, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

And he dreamed 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 bring you back to this; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Then Jacob woke up and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” It frightened him. It would frighten anyone to have an experience this intense. Jacob took the stone that he had used as a pillow, and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on it. He anointed it, set it apart, and called the place Beth-el, even though the place was called Luz at the time. Kind of like re-naming 16th Street Hal Greer Blvd. or 20th Street for the victims of the tragic Marshall University plane crash.

“Beth-el” means place of God in Hebrew. This was a holy place, not just to Jacob, but to his descendents and all the children of the earth forever.

Jacob is no choir boy. He is narcissitic and self-serving. He has lied and cheated and schemed his way thru life. He is a scoundrel and the last person we’d think of as deserving God’s attention. But, God runs him to ground, so to speak, hotly pursuing Jacob, to tap him for holy work.

Barbara Brown Taylor says Jacob is on no spiritual quest; he has simply pushed his luck too far and left town in a hurry. He is between times and places, in a limbo of his own making. He stops in a place that isn’t distinctive at all, or so he believes. And it is here that God comes to meet Jacob. Our colorful history and misdeeds matter not one bit when God decides to call, when God comes pursuing us. Taylor writes, “Jacob is nowhere, which is where the dream touches down...not where it should be, but where he is.”

In this text, and in the Matthew text, God demonstrates an extraordinary capacity for grace. Here he reaches out to a man with a checkered past to set him on a path that leads to a future that will define a whole culture, race and religion. In the Matthew text, God allows the weeds to grow alongside the good wheat for a time, though they are detrimental to the crop and deserving of a bonfire.

Which brings me to a couple of ideas I’d like us to take away this morning:

One is the idea of nearness and distance. Jacob’s place in his family of origin is damaged thru his own sinfulness. Being in close proximity becomes dangerous for him and he runs away. He is cut off from his own family and faith community and yet, through the mighty acts of God, Jacob becomes the link between their long history and their deepest hopes for the future. Later on in Jacob’s story, he will be re-named “Israel.” No matter how alone he may have felt, and even before he knew it, Jacob belonged to something greater than himself. He tricked his brother and father to gain an undeserved birthright and is now the one through whom the entire human family will be blessed.

But, let's remember that Jacob is not an entirely new person. He is flawed and so are we have devoted our lives to love and serve the Lord, we sin. We commit acts that harm others and we fail to come to the assistance of those who need us.

Day by day, I am reminded of the chorus of a little song that witnesses to that reality:

“Grace grace, God’s grace.
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within.
Grace, grace, God’s grace.
Grace that is greater than all my sin.”

The other idea I want to lift up is the question of place, of the distance between God and human beings. All of our texts today testify to the very present nature of God. God is with us. Always. And everywhere. There is nowhere we can go to escape, hide or hope God forgets about us or gives up on us. This is our great good news.

Sometimes the presence of God overwhelms us. These are the thin places the Celts talked about. These are the moments that shape us, that tell us who God is and who we are to God. Maybe these times are so profound that we feel compelled to do something to set them apart. We set up memorials. Like Jacob took his stone pillow and set it up as a monument.

My friend, David, says the little chapel that is secreted away on the ground floor of Trinity Episcopal Church is one of those places for him. It is a place that he experienced a vivid experience of God’s presence and love.

For me, it’s the moment the mountains come into view at the intersection of Black Mountain Road and Cherry Street in Black Mountain, North Carolina. It always takes my breath away. Do you know what a cairn is? It is a pile of rocks set up as a memorial to a special person or place or moment of importance. Cairn is a Scottish word. Cairns have been made since prehistoric times.

In modern times, they are used as monuments, but they could also mark a burial site. They have been used for ceremonial purposes, to mark trails, or for use in astronomy.

Friends of mine recently celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary by hiking a favorite trail, reflecting on their life and love in all its challenges. Then they built a cairn to remember this milestone, and their hopes for another forty years and to give thanks to God.

How would you build your cairn? What experiences do you want to remember forever? How do you want your family and friends to remember you? Where have you encountered God...where has God run you to ground?

This red brick building on the corner of Main and Park in Barboursville is a cairn of sorts. It is the testimony to the faith and vision of the first church members. A lot has changed since then. A few more stones have been added to the first pile. What are they? Where are they? Who carried them to this site and worked them into form and function?

Some of us have been overwhelmed by nostalgia in recent weeks. The Beverly Hills property has come under contract and will soon be sold. There are some cairns in and around that building as well as this and every church home. Some of my favorites are the hand-painted dishes in the curio cabinet in the parlor. Some of the church women went to Fenton glass and learned to paint on china. The women have all joined the Church Triumphant since, but on the rare occasion that a relative visits, they make their way to the parlor to check and see if we still have Mother's plate. The tears always come as they stand looking at a tangible connection to a spiritual presence. And, the gap is closed.

Today, I invite you to come build a cairn. Take up a rock or more and let's leave a memorial to this day and to our God who has been with us for over one hundred years, in our work and in our play, in our joys and in our sorrows, in our disappointments and in our dreams and in what is still to come.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Lord God, of heaven and earth,
we praise you with thanksgiving and joy,
for you create and sustain and redeem all things.
We thank you for making us in your image,
and sending Jesus, your Son, whose life of love and mercy is the pattern for our lives.
We thank you for your energy behind all things,
for your Spirit to inspire us in this season of challenge and change.
Strengthen us in the days ahead,
show us how to adapt to new ways of worship, service, and fellowship.
We pray for those who lead this and all the nations of the world, that they may work for the well-being of the people entrusted to them, with hearts, minds, and intentions to improve the lives of all the world's peoples;

for teachers and others whose plans for the fall cannot yet be confirmed ;
for those in the healing professions, that they remain healthy, alert, and dedicated to their patient;
for all whose incomes have been diminished or lost as a result of the pandemic;
for families trying to cope with the stress of caring for restless children during a long, hot summer;
for young people, that they may not be tempted by destructive activities when boredom sets in;
for the poor, the hungry, those seeking shelter, the sick, the forgotten;
for those we lift now, who are in need of your presence and love and care...
Eternal God, keep us in the embrace of your care, that we may serve you faithfully, with cheerful hearts, praying as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...Amen.

***Blessing**

Go now, with your hope set on Christ.
Let the Spirit guide you.
Let your righteousness shine like the sun
until darkness and light are one.
And wherever you go,
whether you scale the highest heavens or plunge to the depths,
may God's presence be known to you,
may Christ Jesus welcome you into his embrace,
and may the Spirit assure you that you are beloved.

***Postlude**

Announcement:

Worship services will resume at Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church, 955 Main Street, Barboursville, WV, on July 12, 2020, at 11:00AM. Weather permitting, we will meet outside. Safety precautions will be observed, including the wearing of masks and physical distancing. We will continue to offer worship through the church website for those who prefer to remain at home at this time.