

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

YOUR WILDERNESS

A sermon preached 23rd July 2017, the 6th Sunday after Trinity, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Genesis 28. 10–19.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 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." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

Jacob in the wilderness, on the lam from his brother, lying down with a stone for a pillow, angels descending a ladder from heaven, is a story of self-discovery. In the wilderness, you discover who you actually are. The burden that lays on you can be quite considerable, because to discover before God who you really are is less cozy than it might sound.

We live in a time where self-discovery and self-expression sound wonderful. Yet we belong to St Stephen's, a community where other-discovery and other-expression — the recent mission trip to Taos, this week's Camp Create here on our campus — opens us up to others, and just there, to joys not discoverable by self-absorption. To belong to such a community when the notion dominant in our society, *If only everybody else would go away, if only everybody else would stop telling me what to do, then I'd be so marvelous, then my self would flower wonderfully, in all its creativity and beauty and complexity!* is a gift.

Jacob is in the wilderness hightailing it away from Esau whom he's ripped off a second time. It's late. He's tired. He uses a stone for a pillow because he'd left home in such a hurry that he hadn't time to pack his pillow. His mother has told him his brother means to kill him. He's afraid. And it's there in the wilderness, when if he is to sleep at all it should be with nightmares, that he sleeps like a baby tucked in by the Most High himself. And in that dream, God doesn't cuss him out, which is what he had coming to

him. Instead, God tells him that the land he was lying on would belong to him and his descendants and that someday his children's children would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. It's as if God gives Jacob not the whipping he deserves but a venti white chocolate mocha frappacino with whipped cream. As if that weren't enough, he tops it off with the best cherry ever put on top of anything anywhere: "Behold, I am with you always and will keep you wherever you go."

It's hard to swallow if you believe the best things in life are the things you can get for yourself if you want them badly enough. That's what Jacob learned through his encounter with a stranger. He learned that the greatest joys in life are not the things he could grab for himself but the things that can only be given and received. You can *take* all you want, but it won't get you what Jacob got. It won't get you what Esau gave him when at last he caught up to him. Remember that? Esau, when he caught up to his brother, gave him not the sound beating he deserved, or worse. Instead, he 'fell on his neck' and kissed him.

After we've finished this liturgy, we're going to have our usual coffee and refreshments in Kimball Hall, and then Ifetkhar Hai will speak to us for ten minutes about his calling to encourage interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians. That will open up a panel discussion among us, Fr Schaper and I and

our Muslim brother, where we'll be interested in your observations and your questions.

The Church is a type of Jacob. Today, as in every age, it's the community of those who have been overwhelmed as Jacob was by an angel in the night. We've been overwhelmed by the gift of God in Jesus Christ and overwhelmed therefore by the gift of God in one another. And the crystalizing of that in the events of Baptism and the Eucharist is what the Church, and this parish church St Stephen's, is at its heart about.

How is that going to become a reality for those whose perception of Jesus comes from such a different place that I can't begin to understand it? I don't know,

and I need not know. What I'm called to do today, and not tomorrow, is first of all as a Christian believer to be faithful to what the act of God has done for me and to me in the events of Jesus. To be faithful to revelation in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.

And what I'm also called to do today is to approach those others who claim to be in relation with the unconditional mercy and grace that sustains the universe, to approach them asking, What have you to tell me? What have you to give me? And to be expectant, to be ready to be overwhelmed by what they give me, and even sometimes silenced by what they give me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org or at www.facebook.com/St.Stephens.Belvedere*