

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
July 19, 2020; 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

SCRIPTURE READING

Genesis 28:10-19

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

SERMON

Surely the Lord Is In This

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Jacob is lying in the middle of nowhere with his head on a rock. No disrespect to the original inhabitants of the area of Luz, but in the annals of the people of Israel, Jacob's descendants, there is a rich history to come in this place which Jacob will name Bethel—but to Jacob, when he goes to bed, he's lying in a pit of gravel in nowhere-ville, man. Does this seem like a heavenly spot? My idea of a blissful place filled with the presence of the Lord doesn't involve sleeping on the ground in Luz with my head full of rocks. Clearly, it doesn't to Jacob, either. As he tosses and turns trying to get comfortable on his boulder, he's definitely not in the mode of faithful gratitude. And yet...the Lord is there. If Jacob didn't see it, it's because he wasn't, as we say in the

21st century, being mindful. Luckily for him, the Lord is determined to yank him out of his self-imposed isolation, and shows up in a dream to remind Jacob whose he is.

Don't forget, Jacob wasn't on a camping trip to get in touch with God and nature. He's been on the run from his brother Esau, who wants to kill him. Why? Because Jacob stole Esau's birthright from their father Isaac. So Isaac and Rebekah sent Jacob away and told him to go find a wife among their distant kin. And here he is, alone in Luz, on a bed of stone, guilty, frightened, and apprehensive about the future. If the God of Israel were one who turned away when we messed up, when we gave in to fear & exhaustion, when we were unhappy and eating the bread of anxious toil, as it says in Psalms 127:2, this would be the time for the Lord to take a powder. If a life of challenge were proof that God wasn't watching out for us, Jacob's night in Luz ought to have been evidence enough to cause Jacob to give up. But here on the stone, which is about to be the rock of salvation, Jacob begins to discover that he will be the father of an entire nation of faithful followers of Yahweh. In short order, he will literally become Israel. His brother will forgive him, he will be blessed with more wives than he knows what to do with, and abundance beyond his wildest—well, maybe not beyond Jacob's ability to dream. He was a proficient dreamer.

Just as Jonah found out when he intentionally fled from the Lord, there is nowhere we can find ourselves, not even the gullet of a sea monster, that God is not. Indeed, Jonah has been wishing God would leave him alone—it's in finding himself fish food that he rediscovers his faith. It is inside the belly of a giant fish that Jonah offers a confident prayer of deliverance, which comes in the form of being spewed onto the beach. You know you're having a tough day when the most wonderful thing to happen to you is being vomited by a whale.

Or as it was written by the Psalmist in 139, much more poetically...

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths of hell (the rocks of Luz or the tummy of a fish) [I paraphrase], you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

Psalms 139:7-12

Maybe right now, you're finding it hard to see where God is at work. We may not be able to see the presence of the Lord in this pandemic, in the isolation of our home, in the complexities of hard decisions about reopening, in the weary centuries-old work

toward racial justice, in the hospital ICU where the patients are fighting to breathe and the workers are falling exhausted, but maybe when they get back up anyway, maybe when that patient works to take one more breath, there we can see the presence... and when the patient dies, surely the presence is there—maybe as they close their eyes at the last, their breathing stops its painful struggle—and they enter what would seem like a dream in this world, and they see the ladder to heaven, and there is no hard climb, but angels to carry them upward. Years ago, in Little Rock I was in the room as a lovely elderly church member took her last breath, and her children and I all saw a light rise from her in the room as she died. I kid you not. Our funeral liturgy quotes Romans 14:8, “In life and death we belong to God.” Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place of death, as it was in life. Psalms 139:5 reads, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” We are hemmed in behind our life, and beyond it.

In the prayer of St. Patrick’s Breastplate, he invokes that reality:

*Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.* (There are numerous variations of this online.)

That’s called the Breastplate of St. Patrick, a breastplate being a shield that guards a soldier’s heart. When I was growing up, there was a stirring Charles Wesley hymn we sang, which is now out of favor:

*Soldiers of Christ, arise, And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies Through His eternal Son.
From strength to strength go on, Wrestle and fight and pray,
Tread all the pow’rs of darkness down And win the well-fought day.*

There were a lot of good Christian Soldier hymns, which we rarely sing now, and I get it—they seem to glorify human warfare. But most of them don’t, actually. The Scriptures they echo are all about the armor of Christian graces with which we do battle against those spiritual arrows that assail our hearts. Friends, if you got up this morning, turned on the news, and your heart was wrenched in pain, anguish, fear and the temptation to despair, but you tried as hard as you could not to give in to it, stay positive and try to actually do something to make a difference, you are a soldier of Christ. Put your armor on.

And in the panoply of God, laid out in Ephesians 6:10-17, we’re told to “take the shield of faith, with which we will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of evil.” (v.16) Discovering, remembering, seeing that surely the Lord is in this scary place I find myself

is the shield that will allow us to keep soldiering on, keep climbing Jacob's ladder, soldiering up.

The old spiritual, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," is a slave song. You think you're tired from watching the news and wearing a mask? Pick cotton from dawn to dusk under the lash of the whip, and see if you feel like singing a song of faith. It's a song of perseverance, and a song of subversive dissent in the midst of horrific circumstance. Moving upward.

*We are climbing Jacob's ladder, We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder, Soldiers of the cross.*

Again, not soldiers with guns or bombs, but soldiers of the cross, which is the emblem of love and sacrifice. Every rung, every round goes higher, higher. Towards what? Earthly freedom from pain? No, not for the multitude of slaves who first sang this song. Ultimately, the highest rung is reached after the trial of death, and we find freedom from the world in heaven—for only death frees us from the chains of this life. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Are_Climbing_Jacob%27s_Ladder)

But that in no way means our soldiering in faith during our lives is in vain here in the battlefield. The Bible teaches that what gives Life meaning, no matter the circumstance, is seeing God as we go, and giving God glory. Jacob and Jonah were spiritually freed to continue their arduous journeys when they saw the light deep in the pits. Jacob still didn't have a feather pillow. Even after he named Luz "Bethel, House of God," he slept on a slab that night. Jonah marched on with a renewed spirit, stinking of fish puke. The slave is able to pick another bale of cotton with calloused hands, their body enslaved, but not their soul.

*Rise, shine, give God glory, Rise, shine, give God glory,
Rise, shine, give God glory, Soldiers of the cross.*

How can it be that the Lord is in "this," whatever seemingly hopeless despair "this place" is that we are? Look beyond the rock you're lying on to the vision in the clouds, and focus on the angels. Rep. John Lewis died this week, the last remaining speaker from the March on Washington to proclaim the peoples' faith in a dream, a new Jerusalem of equality, love and justice. If Martin Luther King, Jr. was the general in the army of non-violent resistance and change, historian Jon Meacham said that Lewis "was the field commander, the soldier walking point," (The Today Show, NBC-TV, 7/18/20) organizing, and leading the charges into real, physical battles on the part of those committing their lives to hatred and bigotry, where he was assaulted and beaten over and over, ready to lay down his life for the cause of freedom for all.

Where was the presence of the Lord in Emmet Till's murder, when he was lynched at the age of 14, in 1955? For one, in the inspiration of John Lewis, who was the same age as Till, and began his walk toward justice and righteousness. It led him to Dr. King and the engine of change.

Where was the presence of the Lord in Dr. King's murder? In the beginnings of revolution that came as the nation was forced to view that horrific act, and make

changes in laws that brought changes in hearts. The Lord didn't strike down Martin Luther King; James Earl Ray and other agents of hate did that. But the Lord, present at all times, and in all things, made a way in that terror for grace to begin to erupt.

Where is the presence of the Lord in today's pandemic of disease, division, murder, bigotry or ignorance? It may be too early for us to see, but have faith that the Lord will make a way for grace.

In the death of John Lewis, perhaps the presence is a reminder for us of his life of courage and sacrifice, as renewed inspiration for our journey as freedom riders. We don't always get to see how the Lord will work in this, for sometimes it takes a long while. As a Freedom Rider, Lewis was beaten by a Klansman, who later grew to be horrified at what he'd done, and years afterward apologized to Lewis, who because he really believed in what he preached, forgave the man and they became friends.

We can choose to look at the continual pictures and videos that pop up every morning and say, "Nothing has changed; it's hopeless and God is letting evil have its way." Or, we can look at the light, look up at the ladder, believe that God will be there every step of the way, and keep climbing.

We can't climb if we don't see the ladder. Keep your eyes open to look with God's vision; keep your heart open to feel the love of God before you and behind you, in you and in your neighbor; keep your ears open to hear the Word from where it whispers or shouts; keep your mouth open to speak encouragement and denounce injustice; and keep your hands open to give, work, and clasp.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us [Paul writes in Romans 8]. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...

God is giving birth to something new and beautiful, revealed in us, the children of God. ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not [yet] see, we wait for it with patience.

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this. Amen.