“Know that I am with you”

A sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Today, we have heard the story of Jacob’s ladder. Our story begins with Jacob, traveling in the desert to Haran, we are told in the verses prior to our text this morning, to find a wife.

That’s not the whole story, though. Jacob has been told to go find a wife in Haran, but he’s been told to do that *now* because in a move of wild deception and trickery, he stole the family’s birthright blessing from his older brother, Esau, who has now threatened to kill him. In today’s story, Jacob is in the desert, on the run.

At the end of a long, hot day of walking, having brought nothing with him, not even a mat to sleep on, he stops for the night. Settling down on a rock, into what I imagine was likely a fitful sleep, he has a vivid dream. He dreams of a tall ladder bridging the gap between heaven and earth, upon which angels are traveling up and down, and he encounters God. In the midst of seemingly never-ending expanse of desert, God says to Jacob, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”

Jacob awakens, sees the presence of God all around him, and marks that amazing new perspective with worship—with a liturgical moment—planting his stone and owning his new relationship with God with a resounding cry of ”How awesome is this place!”

In our present moment of pandemic and economic downturn and racial tension, many of us are experiencing fear, helplessness, and lonliness. We, like Jacob, are journeying in the desert with options for “rest” that are so insufficient as to leave us feeling as if we slept on a rock.

Today’s Genesis passage is an invitation to remember that God is with us always, wherever we go…Or, as is the case for many of us in these continuing days of quarantine, wherever we stay….God is with us in this very moment of pandemic, of staged re-opening, of swirling questions about schools and restaurants and haircuts and plane travel.

God is with us as we hear and process calls for racial justice, in our own confusion about what work in that is ours to do and how we do it, in our grief as we come to ever greater awareness of the pain and suffering of our black brothers and sisters.

God is with us as we scan the landscape and see only more desert, only more long, hot days of walking.

And more, the story of Jacob is also a reminder that God is with us EVEN when we aren’t our best selves. God professes the promise to remain present even as Jacob seeks to outrun his own deception and greed.

So, too, God promises to be with us, even when our worldly desires have gotten the best of us…our competitiveness, our resentment, our propensity to tell only part of the truth. God is with us just as much when we are vastly imperfect expressions of ourselves as in times when we have best expressed the divine light that resides within us.

So, the question that has arisen for me is not whether God is with us, but rather, how do we, like Jacob, hear the reminder of that truth from God?... especially in turbulent times when our brains are racing? God spoke to Jacob in a dream. Many of us have a lot of dreams, especially, for some reason, during this pandemic, and we are still waiting and yearning for God to speak so directly to us in one.

I **think** that the clue to how we can be reminded by God, directly, of God’s comforting and guiding presence with us lies in considering not just Jacob’s relationship with God, but that of his father and grandfather, too.

It wasn’t just Jacob who God spoke to in dreams. For Isaac, Jacob’s father, and Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather, direct communication from God also came in dreams. AND…it wasn’t only Jacob who responded by waking up, naming the sacred area, and marking it with stone and a liturgical moment—Isaac and Abraham did so, too.

Therefore, the manner by which both God communicated with this family and by which this family responded to God seemed to be handed down from generation to generation. Far more than any specific beliefs or religious laws, it was the RELATIONSHIP with God, itself—the way in which God spoke to them, and they spoke to God—that was handed down. So, if Jacob ever wondered how he, too, would hear from God, he could look to Isaac and then Abraham and expect that he, too, would likely meet God in his dreams.

This week, I have begun examining the ways I know God is present with me, and my own “This is awesome!” response, and quite a lot of my relationship with God has, indeed, been given to me by my parents and grandparents.

The church piece, for sure, was given to me by my parents…Growing up, I went to church nearly every week with my father and siblings…much of the way I see and experience God as love was given to me by that church, and by discussions with my father about that as an adult.

But the many other ways I feel God’s comforting, guiding presence have been handed down to me as well.

Music has long been a way that God communicates with me and I communicate with God…Listening to music, dancing to music, playing music….All these were gifted to me by my parents and grandparents. My mother was not religious in my growing up years, but boy did she come alive as a full person when she turned up her favorite Billy Joel song and we all danced around the kitchen, or when she wept to a slow, moving classical piece. And my grandmother played her baby grand piano every day, writing and recording her songs on cassette tapes. What sacred, comforting, space it was for me to lay quietly in the back bedroom of my grandparents’ house while I listened to her playing and singing in the living room.

Jogging is a primary form of prayer for me. And even this seems to have been handed down. I have many memories of coming downstairs having just woke up as my dad entered in the back door from his pre-dawn run. I wonder whether I intuited that the repetitive footfalls and the quiet darkness of early morning was a holy space, especially for someone with three small children and long work hours.

And the certain knowledge of the abiding presence of God that I feel when I spend time with children, my own and many of yours, was also handed down to me. I have such rich memories of spending time with my grandmother, and what it felt like to be in the glow of her undivided attention…and of watching my own mother with my kids, laying on the floor staging car crashes and rocking dolls to sleep.

God is, indeed, with us, keeping us wherever we go, and for those of us who aren’t quite sure how to access that presence…how to really experience that affirmation…it might be helpful to think about the families in which we have been formed.

For some of us, that might be our family of origin...even for those whose families were not religious growing up, there were likely deeply spiritual moments of wonder or joy or sorrow in which you observed your elders accessing some sort of transcendent experience. When did those moments come?

And for others of us whose family of origin was not a place of God’s abundant love, then we might look to the experiences of those outside of our family who became a sort of family to us. Who exuded God’s love to us? And what sustained them and gave them life?

God says, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”

Indeed, how awesome that is!!