

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP** *(from Psalm 139)*

One: “Lord, you have examined me and you know me. You see me, whether I am working or resting.”

**All: “You are all around me on every side. You protect me with your power.”**

One: The Lord our God is with us to guide and provide.

**All: So let us open our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds, to be filled with God in the spirit of worship.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” GtG 39

1. **Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;  
there is no shadow of turning with thee.  
Thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not.  
As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.**

*Refrain:*

**Great is thy faithfulness!  
Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning, new mercies I see.  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!**

2. **Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above  
join with all nature in manifold witness  
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.**

*(Refrain)*

3. **Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,**

**strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:  
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!**  
*(Refrain)*

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**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Forgive us, O God, for all those times when we shut our eyes to your faithfulness, when we close our ears to your call, when we shut off our minds and miss your insights; when we close our hearts to your still, small voice within. Have mercy upon us, O God. Forgive our shutting ourselves off from you. Open us up to your presence and your word. Touch us by your Spirit, and remake us in the image of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

**\*SILENT CONFESSION**

**\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from Isaiah 44)*

**One:** The Lord says, "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

**All:** **In the name of Jesus Christ we approach God in confidence. For through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ we are restored and forgiven.**

**\*THE PEACE**

**One:** The peace of Christ be with you.

**All:** **And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

**THE WORD**

**SCRIPTURE READING**      Genesis 28:10-19

GENESIS 28:10-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

*<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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; <sup>14</sup> 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.*

<sup>15</sup> 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.”

<sup>16</sup> Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!” <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel. [which means “house of God”]

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**SERMON** “Grazing the Rung of Jacob’s Ladder” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Jacob has a dream -- powerful in its imagery, profound in its impact -- of a ladder up to heaven.

*“This is the gate of heaven”* (v.17)

he says.

A contact, a connection: an encounter with God.

Powerful. Profound. And startling, unexpected.

It’s like you’re walking along, your thoughts in one direction, and you’re startled when you brush up against someone (friend) in a crowd, or brush past something else.

*“Surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!”* (v.16)

Where have you experienced heaven touching earth?

When have you grazed a rung of Jacob's ladder?

With such a startling experience of the presence of God -- an experience that rouses you from your sleep of unawareness.

C.S. Lewis describes his own experience at the end of a long process of inquiry and searching. He said it was

**like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.** (C.S. Lewis - Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life, p.237)

Awake to the presence of God, to insight into the truth of God and God's ways, and so also the truth about us/ourselves.

Yes, we confess God is with us always. But we are not always very alert to, nor aware of, God’s presence.

We need to be shaken awake.

And often the experience is unexpected in its time, place, (manner) way.

John Jackson writes:

**The line was long  
But moving briskly,  
And in that line,  
At the very end,  
Stood a young girl  
About twelve years of age.  
She waited patiently  
As those at the front  
Of that very long line  
Received a little rice,  
Some canned goods,  
Or a little fruit.  
Slowly but surely  
She was getting closer  
To the front of that line-  
Closer to the food.  
From time to time  
She would glance  
Across the street.  
She did not notice  
The growing concern  
On the faces of those  
Distributing the food-  
The food was running out.  
Their anxiety began to show,  
But she did not notice.  
Her attention seemed always  
To focus on three figures  
Under the trees  
Across the street.  
At long last  
She stepped forward  
To get her food,  
But the only thing left**

**Was one lonely banana.  
The workers were almost  
Ashamed to tell her  
That that was all that was left.  
She did not seem to mind.  
In fact,  
She seemed genuinely happy  
To get that solitary banana.  
Quietly she took  
The precious gift  
And ran across the street  
Where three small children  
Waited-  
Perhaps her sisters  
And a brother.  
Very deliberately  
She peeled the banana  
And very carefully  
Divided the banana  
Into three equal parts,  
Placing the precious food  
In the eager hands  
Of those three younger ones:  
One for you,  
One for you,  
And one for you.  
She then sat down  
And licked the inside  
Of that banana peel.  
I swear  
I saw the face of God!**

(Peacemaking through  
Worship, 22. PCUSA)

John Jackson saw the face of God in that story he shared.

But I have to confess, my experience with the first reading of this story was deeper still, for I pictured in that story one of our own children, small and young at that time...and I cried. The experience was both unnerving and wondrous, painful and powerful: recognizing the presence of God in “the least of these,” and in smallest, even in our own children.

Where have you experienced heaven touching earth?

When have you grazed a rung of Jacob's ladder?

Experiencing the presence, the touch of God...

-through a sunset or a snowscape whose beauty and majesty takes your breath away;

-in an act of kindness unexpected, yet genuine;

-in an offer of forgiveness undeserved, yet sincere.

And God says, "*Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go*" (v.15) -- God says these words of grace to this scandalous man, to this scoundrel of a man, Jacob. Jacob, who had cheated his brother and tricked his own father, and who was now escaping to go on to cheat and trick yet another day.

Centuries later, John Newton would experience a violent storm on the sea, even as he knew a storm in his soul; and he would turn from the debauchery of the slave trade to become a minister and hymn writer, and write about that "amazing grace" that saves, and transforms "wretches" like you and me.

When have you grazed a rung of Jacob's ladder?

Where have you experienced heaven touching earth?

Sometimes that experience is identified with a place, a significant place.

So Jacob names the place "Bethel," which means 'house of God'.

For me, the parallel place is named 'Montreat': a small town in the mountains of North Carolina, a retreat and conference center for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Many experiences significant to my growth and learning, especially when I was younger, took place there: experiences nudging me on my journey of faith. So much so that the place itself seems to be filled with the presence of God more so than others. It has become a holy place for me, a sanctuary of a sorts (if you will). A place where the air seems more pure, the water more sweet, and life more true. Where every breath seems permeated with the very breath of God.

Actually, what is described in our story in Genesis is less of a place and more an event.

As Augustine grew up in the latter days of the Roman Empire, he roamed and wandered - 'experimented', we would say -- with a hedonistic lifestyle and a mistress, with skepticism and different philosophies of the day; all the while his mother yearned for him to become a Christian. **"In the summer of 386, ...Augustine underwent a profound personal crisis."** He tells the story of being in a garden, weeping with remorse for his (former) life, when he hears a child-like voice saying, "Take up and read; take up and read." He picks up the Bible and reads from Paul's letter to the Romans: "*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*" (13:14). And he wrote,

**...No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.**

*—The Confessions of Saint Augustine, Book VIII, Paragraphs 28 and 29.*  
(from "Augustine" - Wikipedia)

Augustine describes a "conversion" experience, not unlike, in its impact and import, the original 'Damascus Road experience'.

Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus: so important (significant) it is told three times in the book of Acts.

*As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?"*

*"Who are you, Lord?" he asked.*

*"I am Jesus, whom you persecute," the voice said. "But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do." (Acts 9:3-6)*

Paul is changed, his life rearranged, and he is claimed by God in a new and startling way.

Now, such experiences of grazing the rung of Jacob's ladder need not be solely a 'conversion' experience. But they will always be significant -- indeed, transforming -- experiences.

So, the prophet Elijah is afraid for his life. For even though he has won a great victory at Mt. Carmel, he has also made a powerful enemy: the Queen herself, Queen Jezebel, who is now out to get him. So he ran -- ran in fear. And when he came to God's holy mountain,

*the Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:11-13)*

And God gives him new instructions and new direction for his life.

Someone has noted,

**God comes where [God] is not anticipated.** [and hence, the reason we are startled] **That, after all, is the real issue of this [passage]: Is there a coming of God who transforms human reality?** [With the images of the] **dream, [ladder,] angels -- [our story] answer[s] "yes."** (Genesis, Interpretation series, p.244)

Like the coming of God in one born of Mary, crucified by Pontius Pilate, and placed in a tomb for good -- or so they thought.

And so the unanticipated coming of this God is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ -- the itinerant preacher who is the Messiah, the Crucified One who is yet alive -- and seen in his significance and meaning for us, where life arises out of death, where God's power is expressed in weakness, and God's wisdom discovered in foolishness.

Recalling Jacob's experience, Jesus once said,

*"Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Humankind."* (John 1:51)

Here in Jesus Christ we graze the rung of Jacob's ladder.

Walter Brueggemann notes,

**This narrative [in Genesis] raises difficult questions about the nature of an encounter with God. On the one hand, we may be tempted to imagine that this is a "primitive" religious report that has no pertinence to modern reality, for we have "outgrown" such matters. Or on the other hand, we may wish to explain it psychologically and deny its objective reality. But neither of these will do. The narrative shatters our presuppositions. It insists the world is a place of such meetings.** (*Genesis*, Interpretation series, p.242)

Jacob and Paul; Augustine and C.S. Lewis; Elijah and John Newton -- all attest that it is true: that **"the world is a place of such meetings,"** of such encounters with God.

What about you? When have you had a startling experience of the presence of God? When *might* you have a startling insight into the truth of God and God's ways, and thus the truth about yourself?

When? Where? We don't know; that's part of why it's so startling.

But go ahead: be surprised -- yet not surprised -- and certainly be grateful, the next time you graze a rung of Jacob's ladder.

**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (*Contemporary*)

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

*(The Apostles' Creed)*

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Pastor: Startling God...  
People: ...awaken us to your presence.

## **THE LORD'S PRAYER** (*Contemporary*)

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and forever. Amen.

## **OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**In gratitude we bring ourselves to you, O God. You have blessed us in ways known and unknown. Receive our offering of thanksgiving and our pledge of ourselves. Use us as your instruments to bring about the fruit of your kingdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** "Nearer, My God, to Thee"

**1. Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!  
E'en though it be a cross That raiseth me;  
Still all my song shall be, Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!**

**2. Though like the wanderer, The sun gone down,  
Darkness be over me, My rest a stone;  
Yet in my dreams I'd be Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!**

3. **There let the way appear Steps unto heaven:  
All that Thou sendest me In mercy given:  
Angels to beckon me, Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!**

4. **Then, with my waking thoughts Bright with Thy praise,  
Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;  
So by my woes to be, Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!**

5. **Or if on joyful wing Cleaving the sky,  
Sun, moon, and stars forgot, Upward I fly,  
Still all my song shall be, Nearer, my God, to Thee,  
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!**

*(Public Domain)*

**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: God has blessed you with an abundance of grace;  
God has claimed you in Jesus Christ.

**All: We will proclaim God's faithfulness;  
we will share our experience and learn from others.**

One: God goes with you wherever you dwell;  
God blesses you, and others through you.

**All: We will abide in the shadow of the Almighty;  
how awesome is the presence of God in all places!**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

**All: ...Amen.**

**POSTLUDE**

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