

Sermon – “Revisiting Reverence”

Scripture – Genesis 28:10-19a, Matthew 13:24-30

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Our first Scripture reading, Genesis 28:10-19a, references Jacob’s ladder connecting earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending bringing the two worlds together. This metaphor breaks through the ancient Greek worldview that earth is left to its own resources and heaven is a remote, self-contained realm for the gods. Yahweh comes to Jacob, the fugitive on the run who is frightened, lonely and ashamed after tricking his older brother Esau and his father Isaac into giving him the birthright and blessing that culture mandated to the oldest son. Instead of judgement God offers Jacob a second chance and a future with God.

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^[a] 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^[b] 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^[c] 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;^[d]

Our second reading is Matthew 13:24-30. The weed alluded to in this parable on the kingdom of God is the “bearded darnel” known in the first century for how closely it resembled wheat in its early stages. It was almost impossible to distinguish between the two, and then one could not be removed without the other because their roots would become intertwined. So Matthew warns the struggling church in the first century that it may be more difficult than you think to distinguish the good and evil believers in your midst. Learn to live side by side, learn tolerance and patience, and beware of hasty judgments. Listen for the Word of God.

²⁴ Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

The title of the sermon: “Revisiting Reverence”

The text: “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.’” *Genesis 28:16*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the surprising ways you make your presence know in our lives. As we reflect on these Scripture readings together, renew our sense of awe and respect for you. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The fall of 2001 I found myself driving from St. Louis to Chicago to be with my mother who was to undergo lung surgery. I was feeling a mixture of gratitude because the cancer was caught early and fear of losing my mother because it brought home to me once again how fragile life is. I am happy to say she survived the cancer and is visiting us in Springfield for two weeks.

This trip took place a few weeks following September 11 and with a new awareness of radical fundamentalism within the Muslim tradition I bought the tapes of Karen Armstrong’s book *The History of God* to listen to on my journey. I found myself among many in the faith community concerned with the heightened rhetoric about waging a war of good against evil and I needed to learn more about our Muslim brothers and sisters who trace their roots to Abraham through Ishmael, Hagar’s son.

I was also reading *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant at the time, which is a fictional historical novel about the women in Jacob’s life from the Genesis narrative. I was intrigued reading about the biblical story from the women’s perspective as I cared for my mother in St. Margaret’s Hospital, having to remind myself from time to time that it was fiction. *The Red Tent’s* plot actually begins after Jacob’s encounter with Yahweh, which we revisited this morning.

Both these books have had an impact on the way I read Scripture. I cannot read about Yahweh visiting Jacob while he was exiled from his community for fear of Esau’s revenge--vulnerable, frightened and ashamed, without remembering that Yahweh also visited Ishmael and his mother Hagar when they were exiled from their community by Abraham and Sarah—also feeling vulnerable and frightened. There is a continuity of God’s grace in both these stories. We come face to face with a God who withholds judgement and who gives second chances to reconcile the ways we hurt one another when we forget our limitations and try to play God.

Likewise, I cannot read Jesus’ parable on the weeds without being mindful of the fundamental tendency within all of us to forget our own limitations and see ourselves as the judge of good and evil in our world. How many human crusades to purify fields—whether the fields are our churches, our synagogues, our mosques or our nations—have gone terrible array and destroyed the lives of innocent people?

The importance of reverence in the way we read Scripture is highlighted in the book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* by Paul Woodruff, who is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin. In this thoughtful book, Dr. Woodruff traces the teachings on reverence in ancient Greece and China and grieves at the loss of reverence in our world today.

He offers no simple definition of this virtue but articulates that reverence begins *in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death.* Besides being able to

feel awe, a reverent person is able to feel *respect for other human beings, flaws and all*. This in turn fosters the ability to feel shame when we show our own moral flaws.

Woodruff points out that reverence and religion are not necessarily the same. The feelings appropriate to reverence are awe, respect and shame. Unfortunately the feelings cultivated by many religious groups tend more toward certainty and superiority. This justifies their members doing dreadful things to one another in the name of religion, which becomes the opposite of reverence. *If you desire peace in the world, Woodruff writes, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.*

Truly reverent communities of faith are those who are aware of their own limitations and, therefore, open to the gifts of others, even those with different beliefs and practices. Truly reverent communities of faith are those that remember they are human.

Perhaps Jacob was never more aware of being human than the night he laid his head on the stone at Bethel. Those of us who have been “between places,” feeling vulnerable and frightened, and have encountered a grace-filled moment when we were suddenly aware that we are not alone understand the sense of awe that Jacob expressed when he was visited by God on this lonely night. Yahweh comes to Jacob in a dream, and rather than offering him judgement, Jacob is given a second chance and a future with God...an opportunity to bridge his past with his future and his mortality with the One who created him. In the unexpected grace Jacob feels a reverence for the holy, a reverence that makes him aware of his unworthiness and inadequacy in the presence of the immortal, invisible God.

Surely the Lord is in this place, he said, and I did not know it.

Jacob has been given a gift. He went on from this holy place to find a new life that would eventually bring his two worlds together. Jacob wasn't a completely different person, but he was changed. God did not cut Jacob off, but gave Jacob a second chance, a chance to grow up, to grow out of his deceptive ways, to mature and to develop his character through hard work and an honest living.

In the Parable of the Weeds Matthew offers insight into the God of Jacob. The God of Jacob's ladder who gives second chances also allows the weeds and the wheat to grow side by side.

Once again we are reminded of our limitations and warned against playing God with our hasty and shortsighted judgments. God will judge each of us, not by a single act or stage in our life but by our whole life. It is God alone who sees all of us and all of our life. Whenever we experience intolerance, hatred and a willingness to cut people out of the mainstream of life, an attempt to remove “the weeds from the wheat” we experience an irreverent and arrogant people.

May we each have the grace to revisit reverence in our lives which begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations. May we never be beyond feeling shame when we fall short of what God expects of us. May we respect other human beings, flaws and all, and may we sense the awe of our God who is present with us and who revisits us in surprising and unexpected ways. The God who is before us, behind us and above us. Amen.