



Confirmations September 28, 2020 St. Michael and All Angels

GENESIS 28:10-19

Jacob left Beersheba 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 up early in the morning, and he took the stone he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the place Bethel; but the name of the place was Luz at first.

JOHN 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

A little bit about this sermon—it is not a “confirmation” sermon. Rather it’s a St Michael and All Angels sermon that deals specifically with the readings for today and the way these readings might speak to our lives. And so what I want to say to you is that your confirmation, your saying yes to life in this Church of ours is saying yes to this Church’s way of understanding our lives as part of the ongoing story of the people of God that, of course, for us, begins with Scripture, continues with the history of the Church, itself and is reflected in the experience stories of people today. It’s in this spirit that I offer you this homily today on your confirmation or reception in the Anglican Church of Canada.

Our passage from Genesis appointed for today about Jacob in the wilderness is one of my favorite passages in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. That’s because the story strikes me as a universal story. It’s a story of a time when someone is in exile, when someone is alienated from their former life, when someone is uncertain and afraid. And it’s the story about how God can mysteriously show up in these very conditions—conditions that you and I know a lot about these days.

The background to this story is this: Jacob has done his brother wrong, very wrong, and has run away, fearing that his brother would do him harm. And so we meet Jacob at a time when the comforts of home and the family relationships are gone, at a time when he’s afraid and uncertain about what lies ahead for him. After being on the run all day, we meet Jacob as he comes to what the Biblical writer calls a “certain place” where, exhausted, Jacob beds down for the night with only a stone for his pillow.

You and I know something of this setting and this predicament. No, you and I aren’t on the run (I hope) from a family member we’ve wronged. But in many ways these days you and I while at home have been forced from the lives we used to know as home. We’ve come to a “certain place” that is not where we have been before--alienated from the way life was supposed to be in our families, in

our work places and in our lives in the Church. And what is more, we don't know whether things will ever return to normal. And so, as one preacher puts it, we find ourselves, at an outpost called "Alienation" at a stopping place named "Uncertainty," in an encampment called "Fear." And fittingly, all we have is a stone pillow to lay our heads on as we do our best to rest in such a place. But here's the thing. In this story, in the outpost called Homesickness, in the stopping place named Uncertainty, in the encampment called Fear, in this place where our heads have only a stone pillow to rest upon, in this same story, something surprising happens:

Jacob falls asleep, and, behold, he dreams a dream.

It's a dream about a stairway, a stairway between where he is physically, psychologically and spiritually and heaven, itself. And walking up and down on that stairway are heavenly creatures, creatures whose role is to witness to the presence of God and to assist human beings in whatever predicament they find themselves in. And as he sees this, and even after waking up from the dream, Jacob feels the presence of God, though he had not noticed it before. And he hears the voice of God tell him that, even in this difficult place, God is present and that God will be present with him in the future.

And Jacob wakes up, still in the same deserted place but somehow changed in the way he sees things. He renames that place "Bethel" which means "the gate of heaven." He does this, not because all the harsh and frightening conditions have disappeared. He does because he's been given a glimpse of a deeper reality and out of this has been given hope for the future.

And so here you and I are—in the midst of a pandemic and with all kinds of other things going on in our lives, a time when we know only too well the feel of the stone pillow beneath our heads. Here we are asking ourselves every day where God is in all of this. And along comes this mysterious twilight story whispering to us that though we didn't know it, God is right beside us and that though we dare not hope for it, God will not desert us in the future.

And if this twilight story were not enough, we have another story that our lectionary places right beside it. It's a daylight story of Jesus in conversation with Nathaniel. Nathaniel thinks he knows who Jesus is—a rather unpromising person from an unpromising part of the world called Nazareth. But in one encounter with Jesus, Nathaniel discovers that Jesus is more than he thought. Jesus is the Son of God come in the flesh, God right beside us, the one who in taking on all the conditions of human life, including alienation, uncertainty and fear becomes the stairway upon which the love of God has come to us. And so in a daylight moment, Nathaniel too is given a new way of understanding the presence of God with us now and for the future as he too stands at the gate of heaven, though he would not have ever expected to be there.

Which brings us to you and to me today. Where in your life, especially in those parts of your life that feel uncertain, alienated and fearful, where in the unpromising parts of your life is it just possible that God is present though you do not notice him, though you do not see her? Where is the Holy One whispering to you or standing beside you with a loving presence that gently urges you on? How might you stop and notice such a presence? How might you listen for it and listen to it, though you had not seen or heard it before?

And here in the Anglican Church, where in the life of our Church, in the hardships, that have occurred here, both in the historical hardships and pains and in the more recent losses and uncertainty, where in the Anglican Church is God present though we have not noticed him, though we have you not seen her? Where is the Holy One whispering love or standing beside us gently urging us on? How might we notice such a presence? How might we listen for it and listen to it, though perhaps we had not seen or heard it before?

Medical doctor Rachel Remen was once asked to work with other physicians to help them be more present to their patients, patients that typically were in difficult emotional states. One of the exercises she had the doctors do was to take out their stethoscopes and to spend several minutes

listening to their own hearts.

At first the physicians paid attention to what they would normally pay attention to in their work: the physical functioning of their hearts. And so they listened for murmurs and lung sounds related to diagnosis. But as time went on most reported that what they were listening to changed—they were listening to something beating at the center of their lives—something that had been there from before they were born. “In that moment,” said Remen “(they) glimpsed something beyond (their) habitual way of seeing and hearing.”

Afterwards there was a silence and one of the cardiologists present began to speak about his work and to wonder aloud how one could be so close to something holy and not know it. It reminded him of a prayer that he heard some time back and, somewhat embarrassed, he began to recite it aloud. Here is my gift to you on your confirmation...

“Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your presence like lightning illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see wherever we gaze that the bush burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, ‘How filled with awe is this place and we did know it.’”