

"In This Place"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
Sunday, July 24, 2011

Old Testament: Genesis 28:10-19

New Testament: Acts 7:44-56

James P. Wind, in an article titled "Places of Healing,"¹ tells of his visit to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. There amid sculptures made of bubble gum and old doors, he came across a piece titled "America's Joyous Future." The artist² had taken a piece of everyday life – in this case a small church bulletin board – and turned it into a provocative work of art. In a manner familiar to churches across the country, she spelled out life at one local congregation in simple, white letters against a stark black background.

The top line, all caps, said: EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL. And beneath that, from top to bottom, it said:

Mon. Alcoholics Anonymous;
Tues. Abused Spouses,
Wed. Eating Disorders; Thur. Say No to Drugs
Fri. Teen Suicide Watch; Sat. Soup Kitchen.

And at the bottom of it all:

Sunday Sermon 9 a.m. – 'America's Joyous Future' Alcoholism, family discord and violence, drug addiction, depression and suicide, hunger and poverty, all of it laid atop 'American's Joyous Future.'

James Wind left that museum wondering what other "visitors thought as they encountered the work of art. Did they see 'America's Joyous Future' as an indictment of churches and synagogues that preach pie-in-the-sky during worship ... while remaining oblivious to the real hurts and needs of people?

Or, did they see it as a sign that (churches) are deeply immersed in human suffering, that their doors are wide open to the pathologies of the times?" In answering Wind's question, we need to ask ourselves, are the buildings we worship in monuments to pie-in-the-sky thinking – where everything looks and feels better viewed from a church pew once a week?

Or, are the churches we come to every Sunday actively meeting real-world needs Monday through Saturday, and of course on Sunday?

¹ Congregations, November-December 1997, 2-3.

² Erika Rothenberg

How we answer this question depends on where we find God in our lives. Is God someone we visit once a week to store up on positive feelings and good intentions? Or will God go with us when we leave this sanctuary today – showing up in our lives throughout the week; giving us reason to celebrate when we return next Sunday, and to share with one another how God is in our lives.

Is this church a place where the righteous come to feel good about themselves, or is there room here for us to come clean about our struggles, and to receive the encouragement and support needed to recognize that God does travel alongside us, even at difficult times?

In our Old Testament lesson, we heard how Jacob left the promised land – Canaan, the place that God gave to our biblical ancestors that they might have safety, joy and abundance. And remembering the story of Jacob, we recall that he did not live a saintly life leading up to this journey he's on. Jacob had stolen his brother's birthright, tricked his father Isaac into giving *him* the family blessing of the Lord. And now Jacob is on his way to solidify his place as the family patriarch. He's off to find a suitable wife. Jacob must leave Canaan in search of a wife from his extended family's bloodline, specifically, from the daughters of Lāban, Rachel and Lēah, (who we heard about a few weeks ago in our on going, after-worship Forum on Women in the Bible.

Genesis says, "Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set." Beer-sheba, the place Jacob is leaving, is the same place where the Lord appeared to Jacob's father Isaac, in much the same way the Lord is about to appear to Jacob. In Gen. 26 – just two chapters earlier – the Lord appears to Isaac at Beer-sheba and says, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear nothing, for I am with you. I will bless you and give you many descendants for the sake of Abraham my servant." And guess how Isaac responds? The same way Jacob will; he erects an altar at Beer-sheba, the place Jacob has just left.

Now fast forward to Jacob in the wilderness. He's traveling through a foreign land; weighted down, no doubt, by the memories of how he put on a disguise to draw close to his father, how he used deceit and political trickery to gain the family position, the position of patriarch that rightfully belonged to his older brother Esau. And finding a spot to rest for the night, Jacob lays down his head. And who shows up in that place in the life of this wayward traveler? Only to be met by the Lord.

"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... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." And just like that, Jacob has had an encounter with God. And just like his father after *his* encounter with God, Jacob erects an altar. He sets up a pillar, pours oil on it, and calls that new place Bethel, which means "the house of God." That place, far from Beer-sheba; far from his home; the House of God.

What more confirmation do we need that *God is indeed with us wherever we go* – here in this church, and throughout the week? What more assurance do we need that God is not confined to this church, that God travels along side us as we struggle through

unfamiliar territory, as we come to grips with our wayward past, as we seek the guidance and support needed to receive the promise of God's blessing for us, regardless of what we've done or where we come from?

Where do you encounter God throughout the week? How do you call on God to be active in your life? Do you live life with the expectation that God is there, ready to answer your prayers, and meet your needs?

A pious but cranky old lady was annoyed because her neighbors forgot to invite her to their picnic. On the morning of the event, they suddenly realized their mistake and sent a little boy to ask her to come. "It's too late now," she snapped. "I've already prayed for rain."

How confident are you that God is on your side; that God is worth engaging in your life other than on Sundays? When you leave this sanctuary a few moments from now, will God go with you? Or, will you leave God behind, happy with your once-a-week encounter?

Genesis tells us that when Jacob encounters God in his "workweek," he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is the place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Where is the "gate of heaven" in your life? How does God enter your life on any given day? Have you allowed God to take up residence in your life? Are you awake to those times and places where God is standing beside you, assuring you that God will be with you and will keep you wherever you go? Do you realize that you, like Isaac and Jacob, have been given a place – "the land on which you" stand – a place in this world where you and your family and friends can find the safety, the joy, the abundance of God's presence in your life?

Are you in touch with where God is in your day-to-day life? If your answer is no or not sure, stay tuned right now, and come back next Sunday. Last Sunday, the LOGOS youth told us about their encounters with God. Almost to the person, every one of them said the grandeur of the mountains brought them closer to God. And, we all remember when Cameron Klim shared how emotional these encounters can be.

During the closing worship service, he said, each of the LOGOS campers got up and spoke about encounters with God. They did this, said Cameron, to help them "prepare to return to the ordinary places of life," what Cameron described as "their places of calling and service to God." The one that struck Cameron the hardest was a boy named Jack. Jack got up and talked about how depressing life was. "If you don't know God," said Cameron, "once you saw that, you definitely knew God."

This is where we encounter God. Not here in this sanctuary, but out there in our lives. God is there waiting for you; waiting for you to take notice; to seek out what God has put in your life as a guide and support, to receive and embrace life's blessings.

The church, the church is the place where we come to remember and celebrate our encounters with God, encounters that take place in our lives, not just in church buildings. If your only encounter with God is at church, you're missing out on God in your life. *Don't miss out on this.* Don't miss out on recognizing how and when God shows up in your life.

Next Sunday, we'll look at the ways we encounter God in our lives; ways to experience the mystery of the risen Lord, ways for you – and me – to claim the blessing of God in our lives. For now, just remember that, yes, God is in this place. But unless we take God with us into our lives, our encounters with God are limited.

Look for God in your life throughout next week. Take time to pray or journal about how you have been touched by God over the years. (To get started, you can read about the "God moments" of others on our church Facebook page; or if you don't use Facebook, see me after church – I can tell you about them and what's there.) Or talk to your friends and families about where God shows up in our lives, and then cast a vision into your future together of where God is, just waiting for you, just waiting to meet you anew. And when you return next Sunday, we'll explore the ways we can hold onto God's presence in our lives; ways that we can be more awake and alive ourselves to how it is that God is in this place – and beyond. Would you do that?

Pastoral Prayer

Great and holy God, you are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Because you are always near, we have no reason to fear, even when our world and our lives seem to be falling apart, crumbling beneath our very feet.

In the midst of danger and destruction, violence and vice, malice and malady, you are a rock of faithfulness; a refuge in which we may find shelter, a port of safety from the storm, a mother's comfort from our fears and anxieties.

Hide us now under your wings; cover us with your mighty hand. When the oceans rise and the thunder roars, we will soar with you above the floods, above the clouds, beyond the turmoil and chaos of this world.

We will be still and know that you are God, and in you we will find rest for our weary hearts, and hope for our souls.

This is our pledge, O Lord, and we ask you to help us fulfill it. Help us to turn to you in times of trouble, just as surely as you are there whenever anyone is in need.

We pray for your presence for those who are lonely or isolated from others. Send your comforting Spirit upon them.

We pray for any who are struggling with illness or disease. Grant them healing and an abiding sense of peace.

We pray that those in need of food and shelter – particularly any suffering from excessive heat – would receive relief. Point us Lord in those directions where we can be an instrument of your care and concern.

For you have provided us with much for which we are thankful, and much that can be shared with others. Bind us together as a congregation; help us to reach out to those in need, even as you have reached out to us.

Remind us that you have come along side us so that we come along side others. Help us to share in your ministry to the world, even as we share in the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.