

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 11 Year A
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Jacob built an altar with the bulky, unyielding stone upon which he had rested his head during the fitful evening, the day he ran away from his family, from the red-hot anger of his brother, exiled from the community for his own safety and for the family's well-being by his mother. He embraced the harshness of the stone with his delicate fingers, lathered oil excessively upon its surface, and marked it as holy, for he said, "Surely, the Lord is in this place!"

A simple stone used to mark the presence of God. Not unlike the stones or pebbles we collect while on the Appalachian Trail, in those moments which we call "thin places", those times when there seems to be no separation between heaven and earth, the same thing Jacob perceived in his dream. We place these pebbles for safekeeping in our pockets, to bring home to the altar, the sacred space we create in our bedrooms, work spaces, or quiet meditation corners, to claim, honor, and affirm the holy space we had found during our morning walk. Or the polished stones engraved with words that find their place on our work desks, reminding us of an attribute of God, conveying words such as peace, love or joy – a purposeful reminder of the presence of God here with us, even in our secular work. Or the gravestones which mark the sacredness of a life lived well in God. Or, the fossils we see in museums, which hold the secret and evidence of life lived millions of years ago, affirming the God of all creation, not just of our present day. Or the small stones we pick up at the end of hospice memorial service, to keep with us, readily available to provide comfort, a touchstone in our pockets or our purses, to be a part of our holy journey through grief, in remembrance of our loved ones. Or the rock someone presented to us as we headed out on a courageous adventure, reminding us of the solidness of our foundation, upon which the next chapter would build. A simple stone can mark our awareness of the presence of the holy. We, like Jacob in this morning's story, can claim and affirm that "The Lord is surely in this place!"

We are honored to witness through words Jacob's "aha" moment, the beginning of his spiritual awakening. It's interesting to me that within two generations of Abram leaving the prosperous city of Ur, following the call of God to uproot his family and journey until he reaches the yet-to-be-determined Promised Land, that this faithfulness, this knowledge about and of YHWH (translated into God for us), had disappeared. Until this point, it appears Jacob, Abraham's grandson, had no understanding or relationship with God. It would have made sense to us if Isaac had chosen not to believe in the God of Abraham, for who would want to love a God who asked your father to bring you up the mountain to be sacrificed, but we know in this narrative that both Isaac and Rebekah prayed to God for Rebekah to conceive, which she did, so you would have imagined there would have been stories shared, prayers offered, and expressions of witness to the movement of God in their lives, but somehow or other, Jacob hadn't believed it or hadn't felt it. In his encounter with the divine, God moves him from being a lonely fugitive to someone who knows the presence of God beside him; God moves him from fear into assurance, from ignorance about God to certainty, and from a solitary figure who cared only

about his own future, to one connected to his ancestors, through YHWH's reminding him of the promise offered to Abraham, then Isaac, and now to him.

In Jacob's dream, the remarkable truth God shares with him is that the Lord is beside him. Next to him, walking along with him. This is a monumental shift from the beliefs of the pagan culture around him, which he will encounter on his journey into this foreign land, and from Abraham's understanding of YHWH – as a God “out there”, above him, largely untouchable and unknowable. We see theological thought developing in this narrative. Now YHWH, the presence of the holy, is here and now, walking alongside Jacob, keeping him safe until his return to the Promised Land.

For Christians, theological thought has continued to develop, and in a particular way, as we understand that God's presence is both out there, external to us, as well as within us, within our very being. This is often spoken of as the transcendent God (out there) and the immanent God as immanent (within) and all this is due to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For us, as is alluded to in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the ladder, the bridge between heaven and earth, the portal through which the divine is accessible. Jesus has restored the connection between the divine and humankind, and Jesus will lead us here and now on earth, and also, when the time comes, lead us home into heaven. This incarnation of Jesus, which we access through the Holy Eucharist and other sacramental moments, is such a gift, for it gives us strength for the journey, hope for the future, and affirms that through all the wondrous deeds we have done on this earth, through all the love we have shared, we are known by God, claimed by God, affirmed by God, and blessed by God.

For us, the divine is always accessible, and there are times when stones can lead the way, deeper into that presence. This was my experience out in Box Canyon on Ghost Ranch, on my first real hiking adventure, which broke me open into the real and living presence of God in a brand-new way, through engagement with, not just observing nature. Along the very rocky and treacherous passageway, there were these wonderful welcoming and exquisite cairns, formations created by an arrangement of a mixture of stones: rough and smooth, rounded and jagged edges, delicate and massive in size, and dull and shining brightly with color. The cairns seemed like spots of hospitality along the way, indicating to us which side of the canyon we should traverse next, always beckoning us deeper toward the head of the canyon, encouraging us to step beyond the impossible obstacle, opening for us the places of pure delight, the pools of shining water, the springs gushing from rocks, the patch of blue sky above suddenly visible from this particular spot. The cairns, the rock formations, invited us further into the mystery of God. I bet we each have a story like this, when we were drawn to the rocks, to hear the crash of the waves at Thunderhole in Acadia National Park in Maine, or the jetties along the New Jersey beach, which contain small pools of water where sea life is born and then collected by children. Or the beauty and great expanse of the Grand Canyon, where the rocks draw us into a place of complete awe of the God who created this beauty. Similarly, in Petra, an ancient trading post, in modern-day Jordan, but which was once in the territory of the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, that brother of Jacob who found God, not in the Israelite religion, but was spiritually connected to the visual landscape of God. Surely, the Lord “was in this place too”, was certainly

what I felt when I walked into Petra last year and the expanse and the colors touched my soul immensely. Perhaps it is the solidness of the stones which open up within us a freedom to offer our soul to God. I think that is why I find the graffiti at Pole Steeple so offensive, because rocks or stones seem so pure, seem to present a solidness that is beyond humankind's reach, and when we mark them, not as the presence of the holy, but in defaming ways, it seems an affront to that which is good in the world.

I'm wondering, if you were to imagine the cairn, this mound of rocks or pebbles, which indicate the way deeper into God for you, as a metaphor for your spiritual activities, for that through which you order your life to reach God, what would you put together to form the mound? What would you pile together? Where would you gather the rocks from? How would you arrange the stones so there was balance in your spiritual life? Perhaps your stones would be your prayer life, times of meditation, scripture study, listening to or playing music, listening to the giggles of your grandchildren, moments of silence during church, or walks in the woods. What are the pieces you need to gather, so the "cairn" of your soul can keep you pointed to the place of God? Jacob found the knowledge of God to be the gateway or portal into God's dwelling. How do you come upon the knowledge of God that brings you into God's dwelling? We learned in our story today that it was God's initiative that led Jacob into this knowledge of God. We can trust that God is taking the initiative with us, in this moment as well.

There are times when stones commemorate or mark the presence of the holy in our lives; there are times when stones lead us deeper into the divine; and there are times when stones block the way for us to open our hearts to the divine. I've been reading a book by Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seasons of Your Heart*, and she speaks metaphorically about the stones we need to roll away in our heart, as the stone was rolled away from the tomb to reveal the resurrection of Jesus.

I set my entire Holy Land trip last year within the framework of a line by John Phillip Newell, a Celtic spiritualist (and an Anglican priest), who said, "a pilgrimage is a return to a place of our resurrection". Our life is that pilgrimage. We can build cairns that take us there; we can mark our arrival at a particular point along the way; and we can remove stones that prevent us from going deeper. In response to Macrina's question, "Where are my stones? What are their names?" I was able to come up with plenty of answers, because there are obvious risks to being fully awake and alive in the newness of Christ; there is much to be given away, much to be handed over, and oddly we seem to resist that fullness of life, even though it's the most precious gift offered to us. I think one of the most common stones that blocks our entrance into the tomb, that empty place where we discover Jesus' resurrection, is our low expectations of what God is doing, or can do, in our lives. Perhaps that's what God broke open for Jacob at Bethel, his satisfaction with himself and his life without God, before he realized the glory God intended for him, as he opened his heart to God. But it is that expectation that there is a God who is beside us, and within us, leading us, loving us, feeding us, redeeming us, and setting us free to be wholly God's that allows us to move forward in our faith. Let us find our way into the place of our resurrection. Amen.