

“Coming Home”
July 20, 2008

Genesis 28:10-19a
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

Oh, my, it’s been a while since I’ve been up here! And here we are again, both different and not so different from who and how we were the last time we were together. I’m still tall, and you all are still beautiful. It does my heart good to see you.

During the last four weeks, while I’ve been out of this pulpit, Chey and I have put a lot of time, energy, and sweat, trying to make a house into a home. We tried to figure out what would go where in the kitchen and the bathrooms, where the bookshelf should be, where we would feed the cat and the dog. We prepped and painted walls, changed some lighting and plumbing fixtures, rehung closet doors, and removed an awning ... and then we finally, at long last, started doing the fun stuff – taking things apart.

Day after day, we used pry bars and hammers, strength and stubbornness to remove door frames, parts of walls, kitchen soffits, kitchen cabinets, and the original, built-in stove. By the time my vacation was over this week and I had to get myself back to church, some of our projects were finished, but most of them are still in process. Drywall joints still look like drywall joints. Studs here and there are still exposed. A door that’s destined to disappear hasn’t disappeared. And don’t get me started about what lies ahead with the floor.

So our house is not what it was a month ago, and it is not what we hope it will be in another year or two (or three or four). And this in between place, this place between what was and what might be, is exactly where we need to make our home. We need to come home – to find home and holiness – in the here and now, between the past and the present. We need to discover the blessings of God in this house that can still feel very in between and in process, so that we can come home and echo the words of Jacob, “Surely God is in this place!”

But, of course, there’s nothing at all unusual about being in an in between place. We are, each and every one of us, always in a place between what was before and what is to come. Our lives, our families, our communities, our planet – nothing is ever the same as it was a year, a month, or even an hour ago, and nothing is yet what it will be in an hour, a month, or a year. We’re always in some place and some state (physical, mental, and spiritual) that fall between what was before and what is to come. And that means we are always in need of discovering, discerning, and encountering the presence and blessing of God where we’ve never encountered them before.

This morning’s reading from the Book of Genesis invites us to recognize that constant need, our need to encounter the Living God in new and unexpected places. This story of Jacob’s journey invites us to listen and look for the God who longs to be known, seen, and heard in all the new and in between places in our *own* journeys.

As the story has been handed down to us, Jacob is on the road to Haran because he is in danger in Beer-sheba, the place he has long called home. Jacob has tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to his older brother Esau. Esau has learned of Jacob’s deception and has made plans to kill him. Hearing of Esau’s plans and having been told by his father to seek a wife elsewhere, Jacob has hit

the road, leaving the known and now dangerous past to seek an unknown and perhaps dangerous future.

We join Jacob at the point when he is unable to stay in Beer-sheba, even if he had wanted to stay, and he has been unable to reach Haran, even though he may have hoped that his journey would already be over. We join him as he stops for the night at a place that seems unfamiliar and probably unwelcoming. Jacob may be wanting to be some place, any place other than where he is on this particular night, but, of course, he can only be where he is. And where he is, lo and behold, is precisely the place God is ready to greet him. Much to his surprise, in a place between the home and the life he has known and the home and life that lie ahead of him, Jacob witnesses the closeness of heaven and earth, and he hears the promises of God. In a place that seems so far from home, Jacob encounters God's home, so he names the place "Bethel," the "House of God."

There are hundreds, most likely thousands, of ways you and I are different from Jacob, our crafty, deceitful ancestor in faith ... or at least we hope so. But one thing, one reality that we do share is that, like Jacob, we can only be where we are. The past is past, and the future has not yet arrived. No matter where we've been and no matter where we're going, God is seeking to encounter us right here, right now, in this moment between what has been and what will be. God is seeking to let us know that any place can be the House of God, the Home of God, at any time.

I must have been needing this reminder at this point in our life together as congregation and minister. Maybe you've been needing it, too. During my time off, in the midst of trying to make a home, I also thought about our first two years together. I reflected on where and how we've become a new community and how we've experienced the grace and blessings of God as a church. And ... I thought and wondered about what may lie ahead for us as congregation and minister. I prayed and pondered, hoping to receive some guidance about where God is leading us.

Visioning and planning, wondering while we wander, hoping and dreaming are all important parts of our faith journeys, and I hope you've also spent some time reflecting on the past and seeking a sense of our path ahead. But we need to remember that we, like Jacob, can only be where we are, and we need to remember that God is seeking to meet us here and now. We need to remember that the House of God, the Home of God, can be within us and around us and beyond us.

In this morning's parables from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks not of the House of God but of the kingdom of heaven. The words of Jacob and Jesus are different, but I think they're both pointing to the same thing. They're talking about the fullness of God's presence, about seeing and living the holiness of creation, and about the possibility that we and all our sisters and brothers can come to know Shalom, the commonwealth of God.

I invite you to be right here, right now as much as you can be. Let go of your past experiences of grace and blessing, your previous glimpses of the commonwealth of God in which we love ourselves and others as God loves us all. Let go, too, of your disappointments with this church and your disappointments with God. Put aside for a moment your hopes, dreams, or fears about the future. Let yourself be in *this* moment with *this* body of God's people.

With your eyes, your ears, your heart, your imagination, with all of who you are, see if you can discover, as Jacob did, that the angels of God, the blessings of God's grace,

are ascending and descending all around us. See if you can recognize the tiny mustard seed of transformative love and compassion that holds within it the enormity of God's care, healing, and protection. See if you sense – or smell – the small measure of yeast that is at work here, making it possible for our lives to expand and broaden and for us to become a people of extravagant welcome and loving service.

Let us also be aware, my beloved brothers and sisters, that Jesus' parables of the kingdom or commonwealth of God contain something of a warning or a challenge ... or maybe just a gentle reminder. When we become willing and able to encounter the commonwealth of God, we will find that we can only receive its gifts, we can only experience the nearness and fullness of God's grace and guidance, if we sell or let go of everything else.

"The kingdom of heaven," we hear, "is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and *sells all that he has* and buys that field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and *sold all that he had* and bought it."

Just like our ancestor Jacob, if we are going to discover God's nearness, encounter the angels of grace and mercy, and find our home in the House of God, we have to let go of our old home and how we've encountered God in the past. We have to let our thoughts and dreams and fears for the future drift into the background. And we have to be ready to shed anything that prevents us from seeing and embracing our home in God's commonwealth.

We are invited and called to encounter the Living, Loving God in this very moment. We may be surprised by the ways in which God reveals Godself to us. What we encounter may look or sound nothing like what we've seen or heard before. Or we may find that our hands are holding so tightly to the past or the future that we can't receive what God is offering in this moment until we empty our hands *completely*.

In each and every moment, in never-ending newness, God invites us to become a part of the kingdom, the commonwealth, that Jesus taught in parable and story. The invitation may come in an unusual envelope, and accepting the invitation may mean selling or letting go of things we thought we could never do without.

No matter what the price, let's accept that invitation to find our home in God with one another, and let's be ready to discover that, no matter what has gone before and what is yet to come, we can come home in this very moment. Having come home to the commonwealth of God, we may indeed find, in the words of the sermon hymn, fulfillment of our lives in love outpoured. Then we will be able to say, "God is in this place, and thanks be to God, we *do* know it!"

Hallelujah and amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
July 20, 2008