

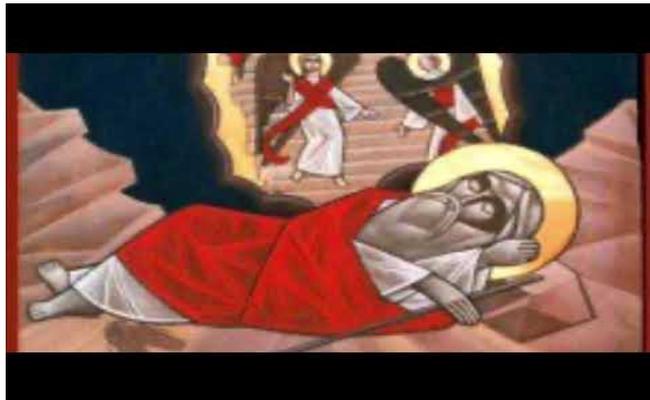


**Centre Congregational Church, United  
Church of Christ  
Sunday, July 19, 2020**

**“Surely God Is in This Place”**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper**

**Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a**



This morning, I'd like to ask all of you, 'how often have you slept in the church?' [Now, I'm not counting the times when you slept during my sermons!] I mean, how often have you had your night's sleep at the church like Jacob did on his way to Harran (Genesis 28:10)? I ask this question because it seems that there is a recurring motif in the Bible that the place where we lay our head at night, and not necessarily at a site of worship, is actually where we should be in communion with God. In our scripture this morning, the day had concluded and the sun had set. Jacob had set-up his pillow, drifted-off to sleep, and dreamed a blessing communicated by God. Later in chapter 32, Jacob spent the night, but in a place he called 'Peniel'. Jacob wrestled with God, survived, and, again, received a blessing.

What fascinates me about these stories is that God revealed God's-self to Jacob wherever Jacob was. That is, God's presence, God's assurance, God's challenge, and God's blessing were found where Jacob laid his head for the night.

So, where did all of us lay our heads last night? At home, I presume! At home. Yet, do we as people of faith consider our homes to be sacred places that are conduits to the divine? How many of us consider our homes to be places to encounter God?

During this COVID pandemic, I grow increasingly weary of not being able to worship at our church. Since March, we have been displaced. We have been exiled, cast out. This exodus is deeply painful. I hear Marion Daley's expressions of pain at being prevented from worshipping in the sanctuary. I echo them. For Marion, the sanctuary has been where she and her husband Darrel experienced the divine. I note from the very first days of exile, Dennis Newman's confusion of not being able to enter the church. He was bewildered. The church is where Dennis finds the fellowship he so craves. The sanctuary is where Jack Bixby interpreted the Word of God. It is where Mary plays that majestic instrument, the organ (that we are still fortunate to hear). And the organ accompanies the only instrument that is more majestic, our Centre Church choir. For me, if God had a smell (I know I can have a smell, especially after I run), but God, if God had a smell, God for me would smell like brewing church coffee. Not Starbucks, not Seattle's best, not Mocha Joe's coffee, no! God

would smell like 9:30am church parlor coffee! We experience communication with God once a year on Christmas Eve and once a month on Holy Communion Sunday, when the world is as it should be, if even just for a moment, when we are assured and blessed by God.

Yet, friends, I want you to look around. Though you are in worship, you *are* at home. This Sunday I would like us to remember that where we lay our heads there is a ladder, there is an escalator, there is a staircase to heaven. [And if you are like Marion Daley, you can sit and ride-up that staircase!). Friends, I want you to look around your house now and I want you say, ‘Surely, God is in this place!’. Say it! Say, ‘Surely, God is in this place’. I know you might be nervous thinking I’m getting all evangelical on you. But you are muted! So, you can say it out loud without being self-conscious. Say it: ‘Surely, God is in this place!’

During this time that we are exiled from our church and sanctuary, I want to affirm that the true temple, the true altar, the true place of worship is your home. I am aware that I am reminding us of what we already know! For the lesson that I teach in this message, all of you have taught me. I have received divine hospitality at Bob and Sen Pu’s home. I have seen the tenderness in Bill McCarty’s eyes when he shows me his garden and vegetables. I see the special place where Bonnie Girvan does her daily meditation. I have seen the scripture readings written on scraps of paper that Darrel Daley had laid-out throughout his home. I have sat in vigil in the sacred place where Michael Vose died

surrounded by his family. I have served Sylvia and Milt Eaton the Eucharist at their feet, in their home.

Now that my leave has concluded (and it could not have come soon enough, for I missed you all) and now that COVID restrictions have lifted somewhat, I would like to resume home visitations. I look forward to seeing and hearing from you how you have made your homes your 'Beth-El's'. In the coming months, I look forward to seeing your places of devotion at home: where you pray, where you worship. [Anne Fecto, I look forward to the church affording me that round-trip ticket to Lisa's home in Italy.] I look forward to eating, and eating sumptuously, at your tables.

I want to show you two items in my home. These hearts are made from my grandfather's work shirts. They are here to remind me of my ancestors and all that they have taught me. These hearts are part of my sacred 'pillar', like that set-up by Jacob to remind his ancestors that "Surely, God is in this place" (Genesis 28:16). Like Beth-El, I want my home to be 'no other than a house of God' (Genesis 28:17). I want my home to be, as it was for Jacob, 'the gate of heaven' (Genesis 28:17).

Lastly, I am a Christian, and proudly so. So, my sanctuary, my home, begins and ends with the Cross. This cross is made of wood from Africa where I began my ministry. I brought this cross from Africa to Vermont and it reminds me of the same promise God gave to Jacob: "I will protect you wherever you go

[...]; for I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised [...], to the end of time” (Genesis 28:28:15 and Matthew 28:20).

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.