

“Surely God Is In This Place”
Based on Genesis 28: 10-19A
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July 27, 2011

Sometimes you just need to step away. Step back. Step away “from it all.” Jacob is on the lam. Having tricked his father into granting him the blessing and inheritance that was due to his older brother, Esau, Jacob had to run away in order to avoid the wrath of Esau who was going to kill him. Jacob was on the run.

In the Biblical narrative, Jacob’s story has been purely secular until this time. Jacob’s trickery is anything but righteous. There is no mention of Jacob in remotely religious terms. No mention of any relationship with God. He’s on the run. Until he can run no more. He is exhausted and is forced to stop for a good night’s rest. Or at least, as good a night’s sleep as one can get out in the wilderness with a rock for a pillow.

In this state of exhaustion and rest, God speaks to Jacob. He has a vision of angels descending and ascending a ladder between heaven and earth. And more importantly, he hears directly from God, extending the promise of land and offspring originally granted to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham, then to his father Isaac and now bypassing Esau to Jacob. And God’s promise to Jacob is not only for land and offspring but God tells Jacob, “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.” That’s quite a promise for anyone, but especially for a wily, far from “blameless before the Lord” trickster.

But despite Jacob’s shady past, finally, now that he has this vision and hears directly from God, finally he begins to “get it.” He wakes up from his dream, afraid and says, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God.” In a moment of exhaustion and rest, even Jacob can make a connection with God. What can this mean for us? What can this mean for us, most of whom are also on the run, exhausted, busy and worn down? What might happen if we take some time to step away? To rest? To allow God to talk to us? That’s what I’m hoping to find out.

Today marks two kick-offs. Today marks the beginning of the “all church study” (and I know that not *all* of the church family has signed up and I really hope you will. It’s not too late...). There are three important parts to this six week study, intended to be an opportunity to step away from the well-worn path of our church and spiritual routines, so that we can have an opportunity to listen to where God might be calling us as individuals and as a church. The intention of the study is to focus holistically on mind, body and spirit and the connections among the three.

About a century ago, before every church had a mission and/or vision statement, the denomination established the Great Ends of the Church, the ultimate purposes and

foundational goals of the church. The Great Ends of the Church are: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

John Small, the Director of Theology, Worship and Education Ministries for the PC(USA) notes, “with an economy of words, and a surplus of meaning, the church has six great aims to direct our life together, six basic works of the church that are foundational to who the church is and what the church is called to do.

[Small continues] “The Great Ends of the Church should not be seen as a laundry list of disconnected items, for they are intended as a holistic vision for the church’s life. The church cannot be faithful to the intention of the Great Ends by emphasizing some while neglecting others. All six of the church’s great purposes are integrally related.”¹

The Great Ends are so interconnected that to some, they may seem redundant or difficult to separate out into six different topics. While some may assert that “proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind,” i.e. verbal evangelism, is of utmost importance above and beyond “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world,” i.e. evangelism through the living of our lives. However, the two cannot be separated without compromising the Gospel. We are not called to speak the Gospel without living it. Neither can we live it without speaking it.

And how can we tend to the “shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” or “promote social righteousness” without proclaiming the Gospel and exhibiting the kingdom of heaven? How can outward mission be the sole focus of a congregation while neglecting the internal relationships within the church and between us and God? How can a church with little or no concern for the world beyond its walls exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven?

Likewise, “maintenance of divine worship goes hand-in-hand with “preservation of the truth.” How can right worship, divine worship, be practiced without regard for seeking the truth? As Small writes, “There should be no disjunction between devotion and integrity, drama and doctrine, beauty and truth. Worship that neglects the truth of the gospel, no matter out engaging and creative and inspiring it may be, is not maintaining the worship of *God*. Truth without praise and prayer is not truth about *God*. The Great Ends of the Church display their unity.”²

So as we study the six Great Ends of the Church over the next six weeks, a mostly intellectual pursuit of the mind, which we hope will inspire how we live our lives as individuals and as a church family, what we *do* as individuals and as a congregation, it is important to remember that we are human *beings* not human *doings*. We are human

¹ Joseph D. Small, Ed. *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, (Geneva Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2010), xi.

² *Ibid.*, xii.

beings called to be in relationship with God. Created for that very purpose as the first answer in the Westminster Catechism states, the chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. So we will also attend to our beings, our bodies and our spirits. We will attend to our relationships with God and with the greatest tangible gift God has given any of us: our temples of God, our bodies.

Each week we will be exploring a different spiritual practice. These practices will be new for some, familiar to others. Regardless of whether you are new to these forms of prayer or whether you have been practicing them for years, the hope is that this will be an opportunity for you to commune with God, to listen with fresh ears to what God may be saying to you and to us.

And of course, there's the body. As most of you know, I just got back from instructor training at Yahweh Yoga in Arizona (basically, yoga boot camp) where I was trained as a Christian Yoga instructor. So one of the components of our study is introduction to Christian yoga, a conduit for strengthening body and spirit while quieting the mind. God calls us to *shalom*: lives of peace, well-being and wholeness of the individual, mind, body and soul, as well as of the community. Christian Yoga can help us in our application of all six of the Great Ends of the Church.

But we have another kick-off today. After worship we will mark the kick off of the 40th Anniversary preparations. These preparations will include a celebration next November but that is the least of what the 40th Anniversary Fund is about. Our primary intention is to make improvements to our building, grounds and overall facility, an investment in the *next* forty years. And the forty years after that and the forty after that. So we can be the proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of humankind, providing the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, maintaining divine worship, preserving the truth; promoting of social righteousness, and the exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven to the world for many years to come. Because we believe that God's promise to Jacob, despite his flaws, extends to us despite ours. We believe that God will be with us keep us and will not leave us. We believe, like Jacob, that surely God is in this place, that this is an awesome place, none other than the house of God. Surely God is in this place.