

## July 20, 2008 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 p. 861

### Touched by the Holy

There's a story (said to be a true story), told about the arrival of European explorers to a certain Caribbean island. When the captain of the European ship met with the chief of the local tribe, the chief couldn't see the ship, moored just off the coast. He couldn't see it, because he had no word in his language for a ship, no way to encompass the idea of a ship into his worldview – so, as far as he was concerned, it wasn't there. It wasn't until he began to get to know the captain and his men that his worldview expanded so that he could, indeed, see the ship.

I heard that little tidbit in a film I was shown about the new science in biology, physics, chemistry, and the nature of consciousness itself, called "*What the bleep do we know?*" I don't know if the story's actually true, but it made me wonder what we don't see, because we have no way of including it in our worldview. I thought to myself, "What else could be in this room that I can't perceive? Other beings? Ribbons of energy? Angels, maybe?" The question was a bit scary, but also intriguing. The modern world told us that everything that was true could be measured and explained and proven without a shadow of a doubt. The new post-modern science is telling us that the world - reality, itself - may not be as easily defined as all that.

Quantum physics shows us that reality changes when we look at it; it also shows us that looking at or interacting with one aspect of the universe can change another aspect of the universe miles away. The world is not as predictable, controllable, or measurable as we thought it was: there is a great deal of mystery in this world, and a great deal that provokes awe and wonder. It is often that sense of awe and wonder that sends people on a spiritual search, looking for a way of interpreting or understanding their sacred experiences. Someone might have a dream that changes their life; another person might experience an overwhelming sense of the vastness of the universe while watching the stars one night; another may experience an incredible sense of the unity and harmony of creation while golfing with their buddies; another might experience healing against all hope from a terrible disease or a life-threatening addiction. People have these wondrous experiences of the holy, and a few of them come to the church, as the traditional interpreters of the holy. A few of them come, but not very many anymore. One United Church interpreter says, "We have been fired as keepers of the sacred."

Why? Because you can get the impression, going to a lot of churches, that being a Christian is about *being good*, or about *doing good*, nothing more than that. Christianity becomes a kind of moral project, and the church becomes a service organisation like any other service organisation, or an institution that's seen to be just one big finger shaking in the collective face of society's sinners.

Don't get me wrong: striving to be a good person, and being of good to others is important – it's central to Christian teaching. But Christianity is a faith, not a social project, and at its heart is something mysterious, something wonderful, something immense and unexplainable and amazing, that we call God, or the Divine. Some folks don't like the word "God" – because the image that comes up is the big Daddy in the sky, or the guy with the thunderbolts who will zap you if you get out of line. But my tradition uses the word "God" to name the force that brought life into the world, the force that holds us all in unfailing love, the being who relates to us in a personal and profound way, the Holy that underlies and connects all things. We call that "God" – and I'm going to stick with that word.

It has been said that many of us in the church, and many of us in ministry, especially, are *functional atheists*. We believe in God – or something like God – but we don't actually act as if God exists in our day to day lives. We take everything on our own shoulders: the fate of the world, the fate of our churches, the fate of our families and friends, and our own individual lives. We forget to pray and to be open to the workings of the Spirit. We forget that God's in charge of the harvest, and we're just the labourers in the field. We get buried under the weight of all that responsibility, and many of us end up stressed out or burnt out by carrying that load.

Being reminded of that mystery, that awesome power that is beyond our grasping, is a powerful antidote to that heaviness that can so weigh us down. I have to be reminded – frequently – that the Spirit is at work; that God is busy luring us all into a path that will lead us to what is good and holy and faithful. While I'm busy chipping away at a wall to get inside a closed up mind or heart, God is inside, opening a window wide, and giving it a good house-cleaning to boot! All I can do, sometimes, is stand back, amazed at what God can do – and pray that I won't get in the way!

Jacob had an encounter with mystery one night on a cold Middle Eastern plain. He was on the run, having played another dirty trick on his brother Esau, and his ailing father Isaac. He not only stole Esau's inheritance; he also stole his blessing. This is a culture that believes wholeheartedly in the power of the sacred to affect one's life. In stealing the blessing that should have gone to his elder brother Esau, Jacob, "The Supplanter", supplanted Esau in every way possible. But instead of enjoying the fruits of his deception, Jacob is on the lam, fleeing the brother who might, under other circumstances, have been his best friend. His twin brother, betrayed and bereft, is ready to kill Jacob. So Jacob is a fugitive, sleeping the fitful sleep of the person who must keep one eye open for danger.

Somehow, though, he falls deeply asleep, and as unexpected peace steals over him, God enters his consciousness, in the form of a dream – a dream of angels ascending and descending on a stairway to heaven. In the midst of his wheeling

and dealing, his scrabbling for success, Jacob is reminded that there is more to life than that everlasting struggle to come out on top. He is reminded that there are things higher, and deeper, and more mysterious, and ultimately, more lasting than the things his life has been about so far. And that something greater stands beside him now, in his dream, promising to be faithful and to care for Jacob and for his children.

Does Jacob's encounter with God change him? Well, eventually – but it takes a while. Jacob has no instantaneous conversion. He knows that he has experienced something holy and mysterious, and he marks it in an act of worship; but then he goes on with his plans, his life, almost as if nothing had happened. It takes a persistent God, a God who hounds us and pursues us and never lets us go, to shake Jacob out of his cheating, underhanded ways and get him to have faith in what God can do through him. But that's a story for another day.

The Psalm for today (139) is one of my favourites. It reminds me that even if I'm running as hard as I can, or digging myself into a deep hole, or sticking my head in a sand like an ostrich waiting for the world to go away so I can feel safe again, God is with me, and isn't about to let me go. Even if I say I don't believe in God, God's still going to be there. Even if I'm angry at God, and try to walk away, God isn't going to walk away from me. Even in an age when many, many people are indifferent to God, or even openly hostile to God, God's still here.

Why do you think people continue to have spiritual experiences? Why do you think there is so much interest in spirituality these days? I believe it's because even when people were turning their backs on God, God was busy, luring them back onto a path which might eventually lead them home. I want this to be a place where people can bring their glimpses of the holy, and connect them to a long line of people who also encountered the holy, and were changed by the experience. I want the church to be a place where people can bring their sacred experiences and learn to share them with others, to help them along the journey of spiritual wisdom. I want to introduce them to a God who gives us those moments, not just as a personal and private gift, but as strength for the journey outward, into care for the community and the world at large, into sharing the Gospel in word and in deed. I want this to be a place where people believe in something deeper, and greater, and higher than themselves, and who feel the pull to draw closer to that mysterious One whose name is Love.

I'm betting there are a lot of people in our communities—people like Jacob the cheater or Sarah the surprised mother or Ruth the steadfast or Peter the big mouthed bumbler or Paul the zealot turned topsy-turvy, or Job the questioner, or Mary Magdalene the apostle – people like our Biblical figures and our historic Christian teachers and leaders – ordinary people who have been touched by the Holy and want to draw closer to God and share that experience with others. This is, in part, what it means to be the church – to be a place where heaven and

earth are drawn together, where we recognize the ladder that stretches from mundane, every day life, into the depths of mystery and back again. The ladder is an old-fashioned image, and a somewhat hierarchical one, so let's not get caught up in the idea of ascending and descending. Let us just hold in our hearts a reminder that God is , as our " Song of Faith" puts it, "Holy Mystery, and Wholly Love", and that the Holy can touch our lives in unexpected, profound and life-changing ways – and that this is the place and the community in which we can share that. Amen.