

Year A, the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)
July 19, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

I always start my sermon with a line from the readings. I almost used another one from our lectionary selection from Genesis, “He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set.” The space between these two verses teaches us a lot about the space we are in right now, like really, right now, you seeing me on a screen at your kitchen table, or the screened in porch, or listening while you walk on a path along some perfect cove you have known for half of your life.

Now I generally don't like to leave bits like St. Matthew offered today just hanging, fiery furnaces and “weeping and gnashing of teeth”, they scare the young, but I am going to leave it today, because today we don't need to hear about good seed and bad weeds; what we do need to hear about is grace, about grace arising in unlikely places, sometimes very unlikely places.

As I said a few weeks ago, I am not super excited about the state of our liturgical life together, you know this, eWorship v.2020. The Church (with a big C) is a lot more than worship. Absolutely. The Church is constellations of relationships; it is working to make real the Commonwealth of God; it is cultural heritage; it is the moral and spiritual formation of our children and ourselves; it is comforting the suffering, and coffee hours and potlucks. Jello wouldn't be Jello if it weren't for The Church. And if you read the eClare, you'll see that we'll soon be joining the storied tradition of Church Bingo nights! (August 6 @ 7)! We are all of that, church is, AND it is our worship that makes us us; everything we do is grounded, empowered, based upon, enabled by, however you want to say it, in the unique mystery that we participate in around the altar of Jesus Christ. We are most us in the eternal and actual encounter we have with the Living God, together, in the sacraments, at Mass.

But that is not where we are now. There are no coffee hours or potlucks. (You might divest of your Jello or hotdish holdings, potlucks won't be back for a long time). I don't want to subject kids to more Zoom, so children's programs are on hold, though the Sacred Ground program is pretty great, even on Zoom. Outreach-wise, being in Phase 2 of reopening, at risk folks are still supposed to shelter in place, so volunteering for folks over 65 is inappropriate. For now our

outreach work is limited to donating things and money, which is important, but the Commonwealth of God is not built with checks. And the constellations of relationships, they are still there, of course, but this distance strains them. Distance does make the heart grow fonder, but it is still distant.

And then, there is the Mass, there is this we are sharing right now. There has been a bit of weeping and gnashing of teeth on my part, but, thank goodness, very little by way of furnaces and fire. But then this reading from Genesis comes around, Jacob and the Ladder or the Stairway to Heaven (stairway is a better translation and, for that matter, a better song). This story gladdens my heart today.

We all know the image of Jacob's Ladder. The story is that Jacob had just stolen his brother Essau's birthright, remember, goat skins on his arms, tricking his blind and dying father. It was like getting someone to change their will after they have been deemed incompetent; as lousy a thing as you can do, and Jacob did it. Essau was angry at being defrauded. Being a hunter, tough and skilled with weapons, he was angry and dangerous, so gentle and deceitful Jacob thought it best to skedaddle. And so in this lousy, largely self-inflicted situation, Jacob found himself in some random place on the road and "stayed there for the night, because the sun had set." He didn't choose to be there, he just was, his situation landed him there. And what happened? God.

Jacob fell sleep and dreamed of a ladder, or stairway, with the angels of God ascending and descending, and then God in God's self appears and blesses him, promising the land Jacob laid on to his offspring, offspring which would be "like the dust of the earth..." Jacob was a scoundrel. He was fleeing after doing a rotten thing to his father and brother. And yet, here God is, blessing him beyond measure, not for merit, Jacob merited a swift kick in the pants (or even a taste of a fiery furnace) but what he got was grace, amazing grace from God's own mouth.

I'm not going to get into the scoundrelly, self-inflicted nature of the COVID pandemic in our nation, though it is not just bad luck that we have the worst outbreak in the world that seems to be spiraling out of control. The fact that we are arguing about masks and schools and Dr. Fauci's competence in this moment speaks for itself about our collective part in *not* getting ahead of the virus. Rather, I want to talk about what we learn from Jacob's dream of the Stairway to Heaven. What we learn is that in the most unlikely times, in the most unlikely places, and at no fault or merit or effort of our own, we can stumble upon grace. I would say that we have stumbled upon grace. And this place of grace has a name, and it is Zoom. No, it is not Zoom, but Zoom is the place through which the current grace we are experiencing happens, the grace of the Body of Christ

gathering to pray and worship, to adore and commune with God and each other, and what an unlikely place it is.

What are we doing right now? We are together, virtually together. In real time, we are sharing an experience. The Word of God is spoken to us together, and God willing and the tide don't rise too much, God's Word is heard. We see each other's faces. Get a glimpse into each other's homes. We hear each other's dogs and see their rats, at least one or two particularly fat rats. We get to hear Lorna and Carlton, and alternately the Caldwells and Heather do their very best in an impossible situation. (And their very best is pretty darn good). We get to see each other sing our hearts out at our kitchen tables (thanks be to God for mute), or we get to see each other watching each other singing our hearts out and not laughing too hard. We see coffee and breakfast and less interested family members in the background. We pray for each other and the world. We hear the news of the church. And all of that through a stream of electrons astrally projected through the cloud on to a liquid crystal display in the sort of privacy of your home. If that is not grace, grace in an unlikely situation, what is?

And then it shifts. As the anthem is played, I put on my lacy surplice, lay out the bread and the wine on the good silver, and hands up, "The Lord be with you..." The Mass part of the Mass begins. Now in the best of situations, like when we are physically gathered around bread and wine, actually taking the blessed and broken Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ into our own uniquely blessed and broken bodies, when asked what is going on, the best I could do is give a good old Anglican smug-shrug and say "Great is the mystery of faith." We don't know what happens in this or any sacramental moment, and be suspicious of anyone who tells you otherwise. It is a mystery in person, the Mass, consuming the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. And I hear a lot of commentary about what we are supposed to be doing in this time of dispersed church. "Do the Mass." "Morning prayer is more appropriate." "Hybridize the Mass" (the latest COVID buzzword), meaning combine various liturgical elements into a current context-specific form. Another I hear is "Yes, we find comfort in the familiar prayers of the Eucharist, but it ain't the same (implying it's not real) so don't do it." One firm point I do agree with is "Do NOT remotely consecrate the elements!" Meaning you can't hold up bread and wine to the camera and the priest consecrates from wherever they are. That is straight from Bishop Curry.

What that scoundrel Jacob found before the Stairway to Heaven that circumstance brought him to, was exactly what we are finding in this spot that our circumstances have brought us to: it is not the place that matters. Any place where divine-human contact happens, where an encounter

with God happens, is a house of God. I don't have a lot of nice things to say about the internet, and less about worshipping on line or how "real" virtual relationships are, but I am here with you right now, really. And so are Lorna and Carlton. And Lyn and the Everdells, and a friend of Chris Ramsey's who is here the first time, and I think someone I met at the vigil on Deer Isle after the noose was found... you are with them. And in being with them, being part of the cloud of witnesses, gathered in time, if not space, God is with us. We didn't chose to be here, circumstances brought us here. We might be *here* for a lot longer than we hope, every Sunday is longer than we want, but with God in Christ with the Holy Spirit, I think we have stumbled into a holy place. I can't make it holy. Even Heather's angelic voice can't do that for us, but God can. And while it is dangerous to talk in certainties when it comes to God and God's economy of grace, God is here, with us, even in unlikely places like 2600:387:5:80d::70. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

I long to gather around our altar on Hinkley Ridge with you. I long to take and bless and break and share and taste the bread and wine cum Body and Blood with you. I do. And as Fr. Tim Boggs pointed out the other day, that kind of longing is maybe not a bad spiritual place to be in, especially for those of us in a culture where having what we want, when we want it is the norm. So we can long for the tactile, the physical touch and taste and sound and smell of our gathering in person, which is good for us (the gathering – well, eventually - AND the longing), and we can revel in the actual reality of God's grace, in the mystery of mysteries that surround all true religion, that is manifesting for us in this terribly hard and still terribly Godly moment. Spiritual communion is still communion. It is still an encounter with God in Christ in the unique and beautiful way it always was and is and shall be. Great is the mystery of faith! AMEN.