

July 19, 20 – Circuit Service, Rev Dr Bonni-Belle Pickard, minister

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

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Benediction

Call to Worship:

We step aside from our normal lives
To worship our God in Spirit and in Truth.
We know that even in difficult times,
Nothing can separate us from the love of God,
In Christ Jesus our Lord!

Today I awake – StF 139

1. Today I awake, and God is before me.
At night, as I dreamt, He summoned the day;
For God never sleeps but patterns the morning
With slithers of gold or glory in grey.

- 2, Today I arise and Christ is beside me.
He walked through the dark to scatter new light.
Yes, Christ is alive, and beckons His people
To hope and to heal, resist, and invite.

3. Today I affirm the Spirit within me
At worship and work, in struggle and rest.
The Spirit inspires all life which is changing
From fearing to faith, from broken to blest.

4. Today I enjoy the Trinity round me,
Above and beneath, before and behind;
The Maker, the Son, the Spirit together -
They called me to life and call me their friend.
John Bell & Graham Maule
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Prayer of Adoration:

Heaven is here, and earth,
And the space is thin between them.
Distance and lockdown restrictions may divide,
But Christ's promise unites
Those bounded by time,
Those blessed by eternity.
Let heaven be glad: **let the whole earth cry glory.**

Heaven is here, and earth,
And the God who made them is present with us.
The Lamb, glorious on the throne, sits beside us;
The Spirit of God, the Dove,
Makes her resting place among us.
God inhales the breath of our prayers
And spreads a table for our satisfaction.
Let heaven be glad: **let the whole earth cry glory.**
Blessing and honour and glory and power
Be to our God for ever and ever. **Amen.**

(adapted from the *Wee Worship Book*, Wild Goose Publications)

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night,

Because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place,

He put it under his head and lay down in that place.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth,
the top of it reaching to heaven;

And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the Lord stood beside him and said,

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.

The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring,

And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,

and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east

and to the north and to the south;

and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

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.”

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

“Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!”

And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place!

This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So Jacob rose early in the morning,

and he took the stone that he had put under his head

and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

He called that place Bethel.

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Meditation on Genesis 28

Two weeks ago, Tony shared with us the Genesis story about Abraham's servant
Going out to find a wife for Isaac...

a story of trust and surprise and following God's leading

The Hebrew Bible is particularly full of stories that the people told each other
around ancient campfires or cozy hearths

Whenever and wherever the family or community needed to reconnect
with their understanding of who they were and who they had been
in relationship with the God of all times and all places
the God of their past and their present and their future.

Perhaps we don't spend enough time around our virtual communal campfires any more

Perhaps we don't remember to tell each other stories of our past
And how God has been at work with us – in good times and difficult times.

I hope you have been keeping some record of these past few months of pandemic

What it felt like to be living day to day in very different circumstances:
Where you're been aware of God's presence.

The stories we tell each other – if only about the excitement of finally getting a haircut! --

Remind us that our small stories are part of something bigger;
Hearing from each other helps us make sense of our own journey;
Telling our stories and listening to the other reminds us we are loved;
And that, even in difficult times, God is always with us.

Some of you might have found yourself at some point in my office at Union Street –

And you might have noticed a long shelf along one wall filled with coloured binders –
Over 70 binders – all labelled with a particular quarter of a particular year --

Containing the orders of service, sermons, and prayers that I have composed and used

Over the past 20 years I've been leading worship in this country.

I like to think of that row of binders as documentation of a collection of my stories

Of how God has been with me and my congregations over the years...

Sometimes I look back at those services as I begin work on a particular service of worship.

I did that as I started work on this service,

And realised the last time I preached on these passages was 17 July 2005.

It took me a few moments to reorient myself to that time and those circumstances.

It was 15 years ago – and I was a minister in N London at that point,

We were still reeling from the impact of the London bombings a few weeks earlier,

A time when suddenly the brutal violence of public terrorism was in our midst,

On our streets, on the busses and tube transport

Which we all took on a regular basis.

It felt like our lives had been turned upside down.

I wrote at the time:

We struggle between being more cautious, more protective, more suspicious...

And the call to be about the business of building a stronger community...

But how can we do that when we feel we don't know who to trust?...

...We find ourselves looking around at fellow tube or bus passengers,

At the exits and under the seats –

Just to see if there was a threat around –

*And how we could get out in a hurry
After a while, it gets very wearing...
Many of us have found it hard to keep going –
We find ourselves staring off into space in the middle of the day –
Lord, where are you in the midst of all this?*

15 years later, in the midst of an on-going pandemic,
we find ourselves asking similar questions –
perhaps not about whether there are bombs under our seats
but about why certain people are not social distancing or wearing masks...
We ask ourselves how we can build community
when we can't be physically close to each other.
We continue to ask ourselves 'where is God in all of this?'

We've been in this pandemic long enough now to know about being protective.
We've been processing our unease and even anger
At those who don't seem to understand the need for protection –
Even as we are, at times, impatient with those who seem to be too protective.

In today's reading, we hear of Jacob's *dream* about a ladder going up to heaven;
The story reminds us that our dreams can be ways to process the 'stuff' of our everyday lives.

In today's story we know that Jacob has been travelling through difficult times.
This follows the story of Jacob 'negotiating' (or cheating!)
a birth-right deal with his brother, Esau;
Who then threatens to kill him... while his mother helps him escape...
There are also hints that in this most dysfunctional family,
Neither their mother nor their father approved of Esau's wives...
So Jacob has left home, ostensibly to find a wife of his own;
To say he has also gone into exile is probably not stretching the point too much...
Gone into exile from family and birthplace --
Experiencing a roller coaster of emotions:
Disorientation, guilt, anger, relief, anxiety
Unconsciously perhaps wondering if he is also in exile from God's presence...
Wondering: Is God in this place?

15 years ago I wrote:

*If there any one of us who does not struggle even at night in our dreams?
Where faces exchange bodies
And roads meander without end
Or suddenly stop at gates or doors or cliff edges?*

During the pandemic, I've had dreams as well,
often about the disorientation of trying to connect with others 'virtually'!
One night after a long series of zoom meetings during the day,
Everyone's face in my dream showed up in a tiny square box!
In another dream, I found myself looking for the zoom 'end meeting' button
When the dream got too intense...
When I wake up from my 'zoom' dreams, I realise again that God is there in my dreams
And God is there in the zoom meetings... connecting us in ways that are new...

*In Jacob's dream, there was a ladder with angels treading up and down –
Connecting heaven and earth –
Making the place where he was what the Celtic Christians would describe as "a thin place"
A place where God's presence was especially evident –
As he was with Jacob's ancestors –
As he would be with Jacob's descendents --
Up and down the ladder of connections –
Assurance that God's presence is one of love and forgiveness and blessing...
Even in the midst of chaos.*

I often noticed that it's when we're in a state of chaos
that God is often most active and creative:
I've also noticed that when Jacob was exhausted and in need of sleep,
He selected a stone to go under his head.
A stone would not be my first choice of a pillow!
I want some firm, yes, but soft – and just the right height to support my neck...
But Jacob selected a stone. Something hard.
And he learned to rest on it.
Perhaps the ancient story reminds us that
*God is especially eager to be with us in our stony places.
That God is waiting patiently to see if we will have the courage
To recognize and honour God's presence --
Turn our stony places over to God
So that God can use them for our good –*

Perhaps we should name one of the 'stony places' of this pandemic
As the necessity for us to physically apart from each other.
We yearn to be back together again!
To be in our familiar places of worship,
Seeing familiar faces, singing familiar hymns,
Giving hugs and chatting over cuppas...
But when we focus all our sights on how we might physically be together again
We might just miss the way God is blessing us in this stony place –
The way that God is continuing to show us new ways to be together
New ways to reach out to others
New ways to reach up to God.
Through technology, we are not just to be able to see each other's faces
Through the protective mask-free screen of our laptops and smart phones,
But we're also able to see inside each other's homes...
Sometimes we've been able to share our worship
with those who might never step inside a church.
God is using the stony places to teach us new possibilities.

When Jacob wakes up from his dream,
He's newly aware of God's presence with him.
And he takes the stone that has been his pillow
And erects it as a monument to his encounter with God:
This is a stony place where God was not afraid to meet me.
This is a stony place where God has blessed me.

Fifteen years ago, we were marking our stony time as one in which we could begin:
To recognize each other not just as strangers, but as brothers and sisters
To begin to erase the paralysing anonymity of public life
By recognising the opportunities to build positive relationships with others...

Here we are 15 years later and wondering if we learned anything at all!
When *this* pandemic has passed – whether that is months or even years ahead –
Will we be able to look back at this stony time and place
And recognise that God was with us? Helping us to connect with God and each other?
Will we have learned the lessons of seeking out new ways to connect with others?
After months of tending to the upkeep of our own homes and gardens
And realising we don't have to jump in the car to drive ourselves everywhere,
Will we continue to be aware of God's good earth around us?
How our previous hurry to go and do more and faster
Led us into deep trouble?
How the earth and all of us breathed a little easier
When we were forced to be content with what was at hand?

The Genesis story goes on to say that when he woke up, Jacob also poured oil on that stone –
Which was a way of blessing the stone, of recognising its sacredness,
Of knowing that God was with him in a difficult situation.
Are there ways, in the midst of the pandemic, that we can pour oil on our stony places?
That we can recognise and point out God's blessings amongst us?
When we're out for a daily walk, could we be consciously praying and giving thanks
for those whose homes we walk past? For well-tended gardens that have blessed us?
Will we continue to give thanks for NHS workers and key workers,
especially those who do their work behind the scenes for little pay?
Will we be grateful for those who have phoned or sent messages or 'zoomed' with us?
For those who have prepared for our worship and fellowship in new ways?
Can we find ways to 'pour oil' on the stony places?
Are there ways in which we can help others recognise God's presence in our midst?

Many of our congregations are beginning to make decisions
About whether it's the right time to return to worshipping in our church buildings.
As and when we do, it's essential to consider the needs of the most vulnerable
As well as hear the 'loud voices'.
Hopefully our stony time of exile/isolation will have taught us, like Jacob,
To appreciate relationships and situations we took for granted;
To see the ways that have truly reconnected us with each other and with God.
Perhaps having learned to recognise God in the stony places,
We will have eyes as well for the resurrection:
When the usual things we thought we knew
might be changed into something completely new...
It's in the following chapter of Genesis, that Jacob meets his wife-to-be!

Indeed, God is with us in our stony places,
Reconnecting, re-uniting, changing us into what we need to be:
To see glory in the chaos, to know peace in spite of pain,
To find God in the midst of us,
loving each beyond the strain. Amen.

O God, you search me and you know me – StF 728

1. O God, You search me and You know me,
All my thoughts lie open to Your gaze.
When I walk or lie down You are before me:
Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

2. You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
And with love everlasting You besiege me:
In every moment of life or death, You are.

3. Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
You have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past and future, too.

4. Although Your Spirit is upon me,
Still I search for shelter from Your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape You:
Even the darkness is radiant in Your sight.

5. For You created me and shaped me,
Gave me life within my mother's womb;
For the wonder of who I am, I praise You:
Safe in Your hands, all creation is made new.

■ Bernadette Farrell,
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Romans 8 26, 35-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
For we do not know how to pray as we ought,
But that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words...

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
Or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
Nor angels, nor rulers,
Nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
Nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
Will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Intercessions – Roger Byard
When we are living—StF 485

1. When we are living, we are in the Lord,

And when we're dying, we are in the Lord;
For in our living and in our dying
We belong to God, we belong to God.

2. Each day allows us to decide for good,
Loving and serving as we know we should;
In thankful giving, in hopeful living,
We belong to God, we belong to God.

3. Sometimes we sorrow, other times, embrace,
Sometimes we question everything we face;
Yet in our yearning is deeper learning:
We belong to God, we belong to God.

4. Till earth is over may we always know
Love never fails us; God has made it so.
Hard times will prove us, never remove us;
We belong to God, we belong to God.

v.1 Mexican traditional
v.2-4 Roberto Escamilla
Eng, version John L Bell

Benediction