

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis.²

“And Jacob went out from Beersheba [**bah-AIR-sheeb-ah**], and went toward Haran [**HAIR-ann**]. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

“And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beth-el [**BETH-ell**]: but the name of that city was called Luz [**LUZZ**] at the first. And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God’s house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.³

“For as touching the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you: For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia [*mass-ee-DOUGH-knee-uh*], that Achaia [*Ah-KYE-uh*] was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many. Yet have I sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this behalf; that, as I said, ye may be ready: Lest haply if they of Macedonia [*mass-ee-DOUGH-knee-uh*] come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, ye) should be ashamed in this same confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up beforehand your bounty, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness. But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work: (As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever. Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men; And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

I would like to approach the Old Testament lesson for today from two vantage points. The first is the ancient, and some would say primitive, belief in what the Irish like to refer to as “thin places.”

Thin places are locations where the boundary between the material world and the spirit world is very permeable. Communication with the spirit world often takes place there, and visions are not uncommon. These special places are often marked with stones, like Stonehenge and other stone circles in England, the Welsh cairns, the great carved stones on Easter Island, and the gravestones that are erected in cemeteries, which are generally considered “thin places.”

In today’s first lesson, the patriarch Jacob finds himself in such a place, and as he sleeps, he dreams. He sees a ladder, more likely a staircase, that stretches from heaven to earth, and angels are moving up and down on it. God stands at the top of the staircase and renews the promise that He made to Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather.

When he wakes up, Jacob declares the place to be “the house of God and the gate of heaven.” He sets up a stone marker and promises, like Abraham before him, to pay his tithe.

The other vantage point from which to look at this passage is a verse from St. John’s Gospel. Philip has gone to fetch his friend Nathaniel and bring him to meet Jesus. But Jesus indicates that he already knows Nathaniel. “How do you know me?” asks Nathaniel. And Jesus replies, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” And Nathaniel says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.”

Now the fig tree may have been a kind of thin place where Nathaniel had a revelation, or perhaps he simply accepted Philip’s assessment that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus kind of chuckles and says, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You’re going to see a lot more than that.” Then he says, “One of these days you are going to see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man.”

That verse prompted the Fathers of the Church to interpret Jacob's vision as a prophecy that is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate link between heaven and earth. It is through Him that God addresses the world and it is through Him that the world has access to God. He is the stairway which angels, the messengers of God, traverse to carry out God's intentions in the world and carry the prayers of men to the throne of God. So it is that we pray to the Father through the Son.

Nathaniel did not witness the Incarnation of the Son of God. Nobody did. The entry of God into human flesh occurred in the darkness of a woman's womb. But Nathaniel did see the Crucifixion. He felt the earthquake. He saw the sun disappear. He heard about the utter destruction of the veil in the temple, which was the boundary between the spiritual and the material in another "thin place." Nathaniel also saw the resurrection body of Jesus ascend into heaven from the same mountain, another "thin place", on which He stood to commission the Apostles to go and preach and teach and baptize throughout the whole world. That commission renewed the promise to Abraham as it was also renewed to Jacob in his vision.

So Jesus is the ultimate "thin place." It is in His person that heaven is brought to earth and earth is raised to heaven. St. Paul says, "There is one God and one mediator between God and men; the man Jesus Christ." And so we believe.

And because we believe that, this place we are in right now is a thin place. It is a place where we come to communicate with God. It is a place where we pray to Him and hear Him speak to us. It is a place where Jesus Himself comes down and enters our very bodies when we eat the bread and drink the wine. And when He comes, we feel the presence, not only of angels, but of the souls of relatives and friends who have gone before us to be with Him.

I have asked you before, and I remind you from time to time, to confine idle conversation and socializing to the narthex and the common room in recognition of the sanctity of this place. I thank you for doing that because it is appropriate when "the Lord is in his holy temple" for all the earth to keep silence before him."

We have even set up a large stone on the corner of this property so everyone may know that this is a thin place. “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.”

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Genesis 28:10-22 (KJV).

³ II Corinthians 9:1-15 (KJV).