

“A Homily for Stone Communion”

First Parish in Lincoln

September 9, 2018

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Today is Stone Communion and in a few minutes I'll invite you to come forward and place your stones on the table.
I was thinking about tonight being Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the High Holy Days in Judaism, and so
I went looking for stories about stones in the Hebrew Scriptures.
And sure enough in the very first book of Genesis there are lots of mentions of stones---
People pile up stones to mark a spot, a significant or holy place. They pile up stones to witness to a promise.
But it was the story that Margit read today that caught my eye.

The first thing to say straight out—
The book of Genesis makes no bones about the fact that Jacob is,
Among other things, a crook.
He wrestles with his twin brother Esau when they are still in their mother's womb
And when Jacob is born, he comes out literally grasping onto his brother's heel
And things don't get much better than that.
Jacob cheats his brother out of what is rightfully his
He tricks his father into giving him a blessing that wasn't his to get.
He cons his father in law, sneaks off with things that aren't his, including both of the man's daughters.
In short, Jacob is kind of a con artist. A bad apple.
In this story, Jacob has left home for the first time.
He's headed God knows where, probably just trying to get away from the mess he made at home, hoping no one is after him.
He finds a place where he thinks it's safe to camp for the night
He's left in too much of a hurry to take his bedroll with him so he tucks a stone under his head for a pillow instead
What an odd thing to do
I don't know about you but
I'd probably bunch up a few clothes or put my head on my arms
But no, Jacob takes a stone and lies down
You'd think he'd lie there all night, bug eyed and wide awake
Because the ground was hard or the pillow was uncomfortable or he felt so bad about the crummy things he'd done
Or that he'd have conscience-stricken dreams
But no,
Jacob falls into a nice deep sleep
And he has a beautiful dream
About heaven.
And earth.
And how they're connected to each other.
A great ladder that stretches up to the sky
And angels

Clad in gossamer wings or rainbows or who knows what
Angels streaming back and forth
Jacob, the rascal of all rascals, puts a rock under his head for a pillow, for God's sake,
And dreams of a heaven so close you can almost touch it,
Scramble up to the top of a ladder and taste it.

But that's not all.
Because suddenly, in the dream, God is there. Standing right next to him.
And you might expect God would be down on Jacob because after all,
This is the guy who breaks rules, takes things, and hurts people.
But no, there is God saying, I'm going to give you land and children and your family is going to spread and be a blessing to the earth.
And then there's a P.S. God says to Jacob
"Know that I am with you
And will keep you
Wherever you go."
Come hell or high water. I'll be there.

Wow. That's quite a dream.

And unlike me, when Jacob wakes up
He actually *remembers* his dream.
We can imagine him, almost sputtering with astonishment.
"Surely," he says, "God was in this place and I did not know it."

Who would have thunk it?
Jacob's on the run, things are a hot mess, he has a rock for a pillow and God shows up *there*?
He's at probably one of the most uncomfortable places in his life—both literally (rock for pillow) and metaphorically (he's screwed up)--
So Jacob is just plain dumbstruck. How could God be in such a place as this and with a person like me?

And I have to wonder if this might be the beginning of a change inside of Jacob (because, yes, there will be a change).
No, it won't happen right away--
He's going to keep on bending the truth and trying to get out of things and taking things that aren't his
He has to go to another country and work for his father in law and marry Rachel and start a family
But Jacob will have his own reckoning
Wrestling with an angel all night
Walking away limping
But somehow changed inside
But that's a story for another day.

This is only the very beginning of Jacob's story
But it is a good beginning
Because it gives us a glimpse of what else is inside a person who's gotten some things wrong
And said some things wrong
And that gives us hope because sometimes *we* get it wrong, say it wrong--
Sometimes it's us who hurt the people we love, the families or communities we love

And we think to ourselves,
If God can show up for a rascal like Jacob—maybe there's hope for me too
Maybe God's steadfastness and blessing and love isn't just for people who get it right
Holiness can show up in unexpected places--
At unexpected times
Uncomfortable times
Even dark times.

And it makes us wonder what would happen if tonight when we go home and it's time for bed
We do something as crazy as put a stone under our head for a pillow
What kind of dreams could come to us?
I doubt you will do that tonight
I know that I will not!

But I like to think of Jacob
There on the hard ground
With a stone for a pillow
And the hard reality of his life inside of him—the guilt and regrets, the great tangle of it all--
But right next to that, the beautiful dream
The vision of how it could be
Earth touching heaven
God as close to him as his own breathing.

Whoever we are, whatever we've done,
Whatever we carry with us today
The holy is as close as a stone for a pillow
Or a dream that comes in the night
And sometimes we find ourselves saying with Jacob
Maybe with the same stunned look he must have gotten on his face
That gobsmacked look of surprise
We find ourselves saying—
“Surely God is in this place
And I did not know it.
This is none other than the house of God.
And this is the gate of heaven.”