

Good morning from a cloudy hill in Rockport!

I've been away on a journey since I was last in the pulpit on July 3rd. This journey was a silent retreat (almost all silent!) to St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Our theme for today is about journeys – all kinds of journeys. I won't say more in these words about our text for today, as I'll be speaking of them in my sermon below. But what I've been reminded of over these past days is the importance of taking journey's occasionally away from one's daily life to settle into some intentional contemplation time of one's life, one's needs, one's desires, one's future.

We get so busy every day, don't we? Busy with the daily rituals of life, busy with the worries we carry with us each day, busy with our responsibilities to those around us, busy, just busy! A journey into contemplation is perhaps one way to step away from all that daily busy-ness to remind ourselves of what is most important, most necessary in the days following that journey into contemplation.

From my iPhone Dictionary this thought about being busy: “If you say someone is busy thinking or worrying about something, you mean that it is taking all their attention, often to such an extent that they are unable to think about anything else.” And so journeying into contemplation can be a way to draw one's attention away from all that daily busy-ness and towards thinking about the greater picture of life, the greater purpose of life, the greater meaning of life.

All the while.... I become more conscious of the fact that having the luxury of being able to take time away to contemplate is a luxury not available to millions and millions of people in our country and around the world. And so I am grateful to the Federated congregation for giving me this luxury.

To close these “Sunday words” today, these thoughts: “Life is a journey filled with unexpected miracles.” “Life is a journey, not a race.” (authors unknown)

Blessings to each one this early Sunday morn..... Susan
p.s. I hope to see many of you in church this morning. I will plan to record my sermon this afternoon for my Facebook page, freerangepastor, and the church's Facebook page, Federated Church of Thomaston.

“....on this journey that I am making....”

A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston

Thomaston, Maine

Sunday, July 17, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway [or ramp or ladder] was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named that site Bethel [which means house of God]; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

Jacob then made a vow, saying, “If God remains with me, if He protects me **on this journey that I am making**, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house – the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.”

Genesis 28:10-22

Will you pray with me. God of all our sacred fathers and mothers of centuries ago, remind us this day that the journeys we take are filled with your guidance, if only we would lay down our own maps and pick up your holy GPS! Amen.

Here’s three questions for today. I’ll ask them now, and again at the end of the sermon. What are the two or three most important journeys you’ve taken in life? Why are they important to you? What did you learn from them? I’ll give you a few prompts....

These could be physical journeys, as when you moved from one location to another, as a child or as an adult, maybe across town, or across the country, or from one country to another.

They could be journeys from one career or work situation to an entirely different career path.

They could be relationship journeys from being single to being in a partnership or marriage, or from being childless to being a parent of one or two or more children. They could be journeys into grandparenthood, which I've been told are a lot more fun than the journeys into parenthood! They could be journeys from marriage to divorce and perhaps back to marriage again. They could be journeys from marriage to widowhood....

They could be journeys from wellness to illness and back to wellness, or wellness to illness.... and not back to wellness.

They could be spiritual journeys from the household of faith in which you grew up, to an entirely different household of faith – say you were born into a Baptist or Catholic family and now you find yourself sitting in these pews.... Or you considered yourself totally outside of any organized religious community and now you find yourself sitting in these pews!

They could be journeys like the one I took this past week to spend time in almost total silence in a little hermitage named “Subiaco” on the grounds of St. Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota.

Since we're all here this morning, none of us have taken that final journey from life to death.... but it IS a journey we're all going to take. We're not going to get out of this life journey alive!

When you think about it.... we take lots of journeys throughout life, don't we? Some we remember with fondness. Some we would like to repeat. Others we would just as soon forget. Journeying is part of life. Journeying IS life, isn't it?

You might say the Bible is a very large and long travel log of people's journeys through life. People are always on the move in the Bible! Into the boat, out of the boat.... in the Old Testament and the New Testament! Into exile, out of exile. Into the wilderness, out of the wilderness. Into the reeds, down by the Nile River, in Genesis; out of the reeds onto the beach, having some fish with Jesus after he's died. Up the mountain, down the mountain, in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Temple, out of the Temple. On the donkey, off the donkey.... In the tomb, out of the tomb....

There's very little sitting still in the Bible.... O.K., Jesus went off to pray privately a LOT, but you have to admit there is a lot of movement in the Bible!

Jacob is our man on the move today. He “left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran.” (Gen 28:10) Remember that Jacob’s father was Isaac, whose father was Abraham, who almost burned him alive for a holy weenie roast as a boy in order to show God he was a believer. That’s a hot topic for another sermon!

Jacob’s brother was Esau, just *slightly* older as they were twins. Esau was very hairy, and there was no love lost between he and his brother, Jacob. (As a side note, when you read about the family situations of our sacred ancestors, you realize the dysfunctions in OUR families don’t hold a candle to the craziness in the families from which we’ve sprung!)

Here’s a little bio of Jacob’s early life by one of my favorite theological writers, Rolf Jacobson: “When Jacob was young, he cheated his older twin brother out of both his birthright (his share of the inheritance) and his blessing. Stealing Esau’s blessing was maybe Jacob’s lowest act. It involved having their mother Rebekah dress him up as Esau so that their blind, old father Isaac thought he was giving the blessing to Esau. When Esau found out about it, the older brother flew into such a murderous rage that Jacob had to flee the country, to live with his Uncle Laban. [This is the place in the story where our text for today comes in.]

Oh his way to Laban’s place, Jacob was forced to camp out at a place called Bethel, with nothing but a rock for a pillow. As he slept, the Lord sent a vision of a ladder that stretched up to heaven, with angels cruising up and down the thing, as if it were a giant, two-way escalator. Now before going any further, imagine Jacob’s state of mind. He had just stolen his brother’s divine Blessing and was running for his life. And then God appeared. Jacob expected the smack [from God] to be dropped straight down on his head, like the rock on which he slept.

But God did something that we have come to expect, but only because we live after Jacob. God was gracious! God repeated the promise to Jacob that had been made to Abraham: ‘I will be your God; you’ll have the land, many descendants, and through you all the earth will be blessed.’ Isn’t that crazy?, [Jacobson writes.] Not only was the blessing-thief *not* going to be punished, he was to be the means through which God worked to bless the entire world!! Jacob’s adventures were only getting going.”^[1]

But for now we focus on the early part of Jacob’s journey on the run.... from his brother Esau, from being a scoundrel, and from being far from the “perfect” member of his family, his tribe, his God.

What I just shared with you from Rolf Jacobson fits one way a midrashic understanding of this text would sound. There are four ways, and this is the

first. This “method of interpretation involves observing the most straightforward meaning of the passage. This is called *peshat* which is the Hebrew word for plain and simple. It is nothing other than noting the details of the verse [or verses] – who are the characters, what happens, in what order....

The second level of interpretation [in midrash study] looks for connections between one text and another. [Jacobson does a little of that, too, in his description of Jacob, who didn’t just decide to take a little trip to see some new scenery. He was running from a very angry brother whose birthright he stole in a very sleazy fashion!] Sometimes in midrash study [we] see an allegorical meaning in the passage or recognize that the text is hinting at something other than what appears in its plain meaning. This is called *remez* in Hebrew. [Brotherly relations, family relations, our relationships with God are all connected!]

The third method of understanding Scripture is called *drash*, or midrash. The word means ‘to search out,’ and midrash seeks to derive a homiletical [or preaching] meaning from the passage. [In other words,] midrash is a way of reading into the text what may not be immediately apparent.... seeking to fill in what appears to be missing from the text. [What is it about a place that makes it holy, we might ask, as we read about Jacob using a stone for a pillow? What’s in a dream? Does it really mean anything? These are questions to ask as we read the text.]

And the fourth method of midrashic interpretation is called *sod*, or secret. It is the mystical understanding of the biblical narrative.... The words of scripture [are] understood to contain hidden meanings that reveal not just the life of human beings in their search for God, but also the inner nature of the divine.”^[21]

The study of biblical texts using midrashic methods, the taking of journeys of all kinds in life, the ponderings we have about God, or no god, in our minds, in our conversations, in our dreams.... Where will they take us?

Here’s those three questions again that I asked at the beginning. I’ve printed them for you on the back of our responsive reading for today, with the midrashic ways of studying just below them. Here’s a thought! You could use this as a bookmark in your Bible as you’re doing your reading in the weeks and months to come!

What are the two or three most important journeys you’ve taken in life? Why are they important to you? What did you learn from them?

Let the people say, “Amen!”

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, July 17, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Kathleen Anderson

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.
An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*
***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Be Thou My Vision -- traditional melody in a setting by Edward Broughton
Call to Worship

One: We gather here to journey with one another and be shaped into the ways of God.

Many: We come here to make space and time special in a moment along our journey.

All: We come to be attentive to God's ways and to God's map for our journey. Let us worship the Lord!

***Opening hymn** "The Church's One Foundation" #545 Blue Hymnal

A Unison Prayer Meditation "Along the Way" (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Genesis 28:10-22

***Gloria Patri No. 70 Glory Be to the Father....**

Message "...on this journey that I am making...."

***Hymn of Meditation** "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" #226 Red Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory Variations on the Welsh hymn "Arfon"

***Doxology No. 95 Blue "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow...."**

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" #276 Red Hymnal**

Benediction

Postlude Festal Chorus -- G. F. Handel

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, July 24, 2022
Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19); Luke 11:1-13**

Especially we continue to hold in prayer our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.... & those who have lost loved ones in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, Texas and beyond..... due to gun violence....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters.... And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all And, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier... and for "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Kristin Parker O'Neal, Jo Ann Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, John Flaherty, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter... And for Arlene from NH.... And for Rev. Wayne Sawyer and Kurt Leidenroth who has broken his leg.

Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email at freerangepastor@gmail.com to have her add or drop any names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She's always glad to have a chat with you!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thursday-7/21/22.....**PLEASE BRING YOUR LUNCH**.....10:00 am: Church Women Meeting

Sunday-7/24/22.....9:30 am: Worship Service

Suggested Food Pantry

Donation.....Baked Beans

The flowers for the Alter this week are given in loving memory of Galo III's brother Christopher by the Hernandez family.

Deacons for July, 2022: Ursula Kruse-Vaucienne

Reminders for next Sunday, July 24, 2022:

Greeter/Usher: Janet

Dwelley

Coffee

Host:

Lector: Mimi

Zwick

Flowers: Sa

ndra

Caron

Collection Total for

Sunday, 7/10/22:

Pledges - \$360.00

Loose - \$ 8.00

Total

- \$368.00

The 2022 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

Federated Church of Thomaston

**United Church of Christ
&
United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

Sunday, July 17, 2022

“The Hebrew term midrash denotes an imaginative expansion of scripture: this is the most common form of biblical interpretation in Jewish tradition.”

Ellen F. Davis, in *Getting Involved With God, Rediscovering the Old Testament*

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To contact the pastor via e-mail: freerangepastor@gmail.com
WiFi password is #1Church

^[1]Jacobson, Rolf A., Karl N. Jacobson, Hans H. Wiersma, *Crazy Book, A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009, p. 131.

^[2]Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash, Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2013, p. 29-31.