

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Ninth Sunday After Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons: ⁱ

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

“And Jacob went out from Beersheba [**Bah-AIR-shebe-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.ⁱⁱⁱ

“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.

Text:

From the _____ Lesson: “. ”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the ancestors of Moses and Aaron. Consequently they did not live under Mosaic Law. They lived under a more ancient and more universal unwritten code that we call “natural law.” Because they did not live under the later Levitical and Deuteronomic Codes, where the distinctively Jewish practices were laid down, those ancient patriarchs also followed some of the same cultic practices that other ancient people followed.

The Bible does not negate natural religion. It affirms it and goes beyond it. In some cases the Bible appeals to natural religion. The psalmist, for instance, says, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork ... their voice goes out through all the earth.”^v St. Paul echoes that Psalm in speaking of those who have not heard the Gospel: “What can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them.... Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”^{vi}

Paul appeals to natural law when he talks about a head covering as the glory of a woman in church^{vii} and also in his argument against homosexual unions.^{viii} And he goes on to say, “When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires ... they show that the law is written on their hearts.” Jesus Himself appeals to natural law over against Mosaic law when he talks about divorce: “For your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”^{ix}

But natural religion is not sufficient by itself. It needs to be informed and greatly augmented by the insights of Judaism and Christianity. It finds its fulfillment in the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, whom St. John in the opening Chapter of his Gospel calls “the true light that enlightens every man.” So Justin the Martyr is able to say in his Second Apology, “Whatever has been uttered aright by any men in any place belongs to us Christians.”

Visions are a common element in natural religion, and they did not die out when the Jewish law was revealed to Moses. Mosaic Law regulated the use of visions and prohibited the occult practices that were designed to bring them about, but visions themselves are accepted throughout the Bible as legitimate vehicles of divine communication with people.

Abraham had visions. Joseph had visions. Isaiah had a famous vision in the temple. Ezekiel and Daniel had lots of visions. Jesus had visions in His wilderness experience and at other times as well. St. Paul speaks of being transported in a vision to the seventh heaven, and the book of Revelation consists entirely of visions, one after another. People still have visions today, and the Vatican has a whole department devoted to investigating them and sorting them out.

These visions usually occur in what the Celts like to call “thin places” – places where the boundary between the material world and the spirit world is very thin and it is easy to pass from one to the other. It is common to find such places marked with stones set on end or piled on top of one another – like at Stonehenge and other stone circles in England, or the cairns in Wales, or the great carved stones on Easter Island, or the grave stones in cemeteries, all of which are generally recognized as “thin places”.

In the First Lesson this morning, the patriarch Jacob finds himself in one of these places. He has a vision and sets up a memorial stone to mark the place. His grandfather, Abraham, had previously erected an altar not far from there and offered a sacrifice to God. The vision, popularly known as “Jacob’s ladder”, was actually a stairway connecting earth to heaven with angels moving in both directions. That certainly qualifies as a thin place.

The key to understanding this vision is, I believe, a Verse imbedded in the Gospel according to St. John.^x Jesus is introduced to Nathaniel, whom He previously observed sitting under a fig tree, probably meditating and day dreaming. Jesus seems to have read Nathaniel’s mind, and Nathaniel is amazed. He says, “Rabbi you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.” And Jesus kind of chuckles

and says, “You believe because of that? You’re going to see a lot more than that. You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”

This is the heart of the matter. Jesus is the ultimate thin place. In Him heaven and earth are joined. He is the only way to the Father. He is fully God and fully man. He brought God down to us in His Incarnation and He brings us up to God in His Resurrection and Ascension. He is the stairway to heaven. Wherever Jesus is, that place is a thin place.

The Church fathers interpret Jacob’s vision as a prophecy that is fulfilled in Jesus. The stairway that Jacob sees is a representation of Him who came down from heaven to lift us up to heaven. And the reason the Church fathers interpret that passage that way is that they are following the Apostolic witness. Nathaniel saw the connection between heaven and earth when he saw Jesus nailed to the cross, when he saw Him risen from the grave, and when he saw Him ascend into heaven.

Jacob says, “This is the house of God”. St. Paul says, “In him [Jesus] all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell”. Jacob says, “This is the gate of heaven.” Jesus says, “I am the door.” Jacob says, “Surely the Lord is in this place.” Jesus says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Conclusion:

It may be a little hard for us to think of this room as a thin place. There are no stones set up to mark it. But when we gather here in the Name of Jesus, He comes to us. Remember what He said: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.”

We would like to be able to gather in a great church with inspiring architecture and stained glass windows and statuary and icons and a magnificent organ. We look forward to the day when we shall build a building that we can set aside for the worship of God. But it is not the architecture or the artwork or the music that makes for a thin place. It is the presence of Christ.

When Jesus was born, a manger became a thin place. When He stood in a field or sat down in a boat or on the side of a mountain to teach, those places became thin places. When Jesus met with His Apostles for their last supper together, that upper room was a thin place. When He was taken outside the city to a miserable knob of land called “Golgotha” – the place of the skull – and hung on a wooden cross, that hill became a thin place and that Cross became a stairway to heaven.

I will be as glad as anyone when we have a place that we can control and can invite people to at any time and can furnish and decorate in a way that is conducive to reverence. But for now, this place where we are right now is none other than the house of God and “this is the gate of heaven”, because “surely the Lord is in this place.”

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St. David's Anglican Church
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*
xxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ *Gen. 28:10-22 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *II Cor. 9:1-15 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Gen. 28:20-22 (RSV).*

^v *Ps. 91.*

^{vi} *Rom. 1:19 ff.*

^{vii} *I Cor. 11:13-16.*

^{viii} *Rom. 1:26, 27.*

^{ix} *Matt. 19:8.*

^x *Jn. 1:51.*