

“On the Way”
Genesis 28:10-22
August 6, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

On sabbatical a few years ago, I got to spend two weeks on the island of Iona, just off the west coast of Scotland. For centuries Iona has been considered a holy place. Even before the arrival of Christian monks in 563, it was called Innis nan Dhruidhanean, the Island of the Druids. Today about 130,000 people a year make the pilgrimage to visit this holy place. Because, that's what it feels like, a holy place. But what makes it that way? Many saints and monks have been buried there going back to the days of St. Columba. In ancient days, many kings of Scotland and Ireland and Denmark, and in more recent times, Dukes of Argyll, have chosen to also be buried there, believing that on the last day when the great trumpet sounds and the dead are raised from their graves that they would have a better chance of getting to heaven if they could grab on to a saint's coattails. Is that what makes it holy, that so many faithful people have been buried there? In the 1200s Benedictine monks built an abbey there, which was restored and rebuilt in the 20th century. And it is possible now to go and spend a week in worship and study and fellowship living in the abbey buildings. Is that what makes it holy, that it is set aside for worship? When I was there it was filled with interesting pilgrims from many places in the world. One late June evening just after midnight, when the sun had just set in those far-north latitudes, I was walking back to the abbey from the local pub with a new friend from Finland, one from Germany, two from England, and a couple from Northern Ireland. And as we neared the abbey, my Finnish friend said, “We're going to stop and sing to the Abbey Church, want to come?” What do you mean? I asked. “Come and see,” she said. We went into the darkened sanctuary and sat on the steps just inside the entrance. The only light was one on the altar at the far end of the church. And they started to sing. They sang some Psalms and some of the songs from the Iona worship book and some old Latin tunes like “Dona Nobis Pacem.” They sang to that empty church. And I had goosebumps for the next hour listening to their voices echo off the stone walls in the darkness. Because of course the church wasn't

empty. Surely God was in that place.

A couple of years ago Erin and I had the opportunity to visit the Holy Land with a group from Louisville Seminary. One day we had a very long day, with quick visits to Jericho and Masada and the Dead Sea. As the sun was setting we were in our tour bus heading for Arad before going to Beersheba the next day. We were driving through the Judean wilderness, the southern desert and I have rarely seen a place that desolate. The bus was driving slowly along the switchbacks that took us up to the plateau from the area of the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth. It occurred to me that this was an empty area of the Holy Land, but a place that Abraham and Isaac had travel through, that David had used to hide from Saul, that John the Baptist lived in, where Jesus experienced his temptations. Was it holy because it was so empty? I felt that this was a place that there were no distractions, this was a holy place, where it could just be you and God. Me and God. God was in this place.

Twenty-nine years ago this fall I drove into Richland for the first time. I parked here in front of the church and there to meet me were Larry Ireys and Juanita Cole, members of the Pastor Nominating Committee that were looking for a new pastor of this church and were looking pretty hard at me. They very proudly showed me around the church, and especially as we walked into this sanctuary. When I walked in here for the first time, I knew this was a holy place. You could feel it as you stood here between these pews where people have sat and worship for more than a hundred and fifty years. God was in this place.

Where is it for you? Where have you felt the presence of God? When have you had the experience of a holy place? I would love to go back to Iona to have that feeling again. I would love to have my family, my friends, all of you to come there too, so we can all know what I knew that night.

How did I know? How does anyone know? What makes a place holy? What was it about these three places that make them special, "thin places" as the Celts would call them? What was there about Bethel, the place Jacob had his dream, that made that a special place? The rabbis of the Talmud call it

Shechinah, which literally means “dwelling.”¹ This is where God dwells. This is a little piece of heaven on Earth. According to some ancient traditions the place where Jacob laid his head that night was the place that becomes known as Mt. Zion, where Solomon builds his Temple, the site of the current Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, near the Western Wall of the ancient Temple where many faithful Jews still go to pray, believing that this place is the very gate of heaven. Some rabbis have taught that the rock that Jacob used as a pillow and then set up as part of his pillar and anointed the next day was part of the larger rock on Zion and on the third day of creation when God commanded that the waters gather together and let the dry land appear, he tossed a great stone into the water of chaos to be the first land to appear and this is that very rock. Is that what makes it special, what makes it holy? When I read this story, one of the questions that occurs to me is what would have happened if Jacob had stopped at a different place? What if he had gotten tired early that day and stopped before he got to this place? What if he had been more frightened by the prospect of his brother's pursuit and decided to ride on through the night and not stopped here at all? Could Jacob have had this dream someplace else? Is it the place that is most important here?

Jacob comes to this place while he is “on the way” from Beer-sheba to Haran. He's journeying, he's just stopping for a few hours to sleep. Is this a special place or was he just especially aware? He was retracing the steps of Abraham and Sarah going back to Haran, after having cheated his brother out of the blessing that was intended for Esau. He felt his father's hands on his head and heard him say, “May God give you the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you.” What was he thinking? Would that really happen to him? Would God still bless him even though that was intended for Esau? But then he has this dream and God promises that he will be with him. God says, “Know that I am with you and will keep you where ever you go. I will not leave you.” The *shechinah*, the dwelling place of God is not in a particular place, it is with Jacob. God is with him on the way, and God will be with him in Haran or anywhere

1 Cohen, Abraham. Everyman's Talmud: the Major Teaching of the Rabbinic Sages. P. 42.

else he goes. The covenant is not just about a rock or a place or a land. It is about the promise of God to be with him. It is about the promise of God to be with us.

The rabbis say that although the *shechinah*, the dwelling place of God is everywhere, its reality is more deeply felt in places and circumstances, which by their sacred character tend to attune the person spiritually to God.² There were people and circumstances that make Iona, and the Judean wilderness, and this very sanctuary holy places to me. You might feel that too in those places, or there may be totally different places for you. It may be that any place can be a holy place. You might think that standing in the checkout line at WalMart isn't a holy place. But do you look around? Do you see the people? Can you feel their wants and needs and hurts? Aren't you connected to them? All it takes is being attuned spiritually to God and that can happen anytime. Because isn't that the covenant? Isn't that what God promises Jacob, that God will be with him always? Isn't that what Jesus promises us, in the last word of Matthew's gospel, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." One of the first places we stayed when we were in Israel was at Tabgha, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is the site of a monastery of German monks and is the traditional place that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. Late one night a few of us decided to join the monks in their service of Compline, the last prayers of the day. We sat with them as they worshiped in Latin and German and shared communion with them. And it was holy because it was a gathering of strangers who were brothers and sisters and it was a feast that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Is that a holy place? It was that night. Because God was there and we were aware of him. That can happen any time, can't it? It can happen when we are on the way from one place to another, because aren't we all "on the way?" Not just here. But also at home, or at work or school. Or as we shop or visit. As we drive or walk on the way anywhere. Because we are on the way to heaven, to be with God, but by his grace he gives us a foretaste of the home that he prepares. When we celebrate communion together it is supposed to be a foretaste of the great banquet that he prepares for when we all sit down at table in God's kingdom. We get a foretaste

² Ibid.

because, like with Jacob, God is with is all along the way.