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Remembering Your Roots

Scriptures: Gen. 12:1-9; John 21:1-8

I love fairy tales. It's fascinating to get lost in a world that is so different from our own, a world that lives by its own rules, a world where life itself plainly shows how instructive just living life can be. There's nothing like following the twelve princesses to their secret land where their feet glide gracefully across the floor, wearing holes in their shoes. Who isn't humbled by the story of the emperor strutting down the middle of town completely naked? And who could forget the sobering visions during the little match girl's final moments? Fairy tales exist to entertain, instruct, and ultimately help us see our own world in a different light.

One reason that fairy tales are successful as a means of communicating difficult concepts or ideas that can sometimes strike a little too close to home is that they are held at a safe distance from the problems and struggles in our everyday lives. They are places of safety, places where we can question ourselves without feeling threatened, places where we can wrestle with the deep issues of who we are and come out changed.

One of the crucial elements of fairy tales is the magical object or place. Characters in fairy tales often possess an object of great power, or they travel to another land or experience places of change. For example, the Little Mermaid seeks to leave her home in the sea to experience the world of humans, a world different from her own, a world that not only changes her physical appearance, but her values, her hopes and dreams...all that she is.

Characters in fairy tales seek to experience power, acceptance, and hope just as much as we do. They are not so far removed from our world that we can't identify with their desire to be changed, to encounter something bigger and greater than they are. We, too, seek places of solace and change. One of the reasons we come to church is to encounter God, to be in his presence, and to be changed, transformed by his love and grace. We know that God is not bound by doors or walls, boundaries or rules. Instead, God can touch us whenever and however he chooses. But there are places where we expect to encounter God. There are places where history, corporate and personal, tells us that God has an almost tangible presence. We call these places sacred, for they have been chosen by God and set aside through his power.

Throughout scripture we find numerous sacred places. The first book of Genesis certainly has its share of places where people meet God and are transformed. The twelfth chapter of Genesis contains the first mention of one of the most important sacred places in the Old Testament. If you were just reading this memorable story you might miss its significance, but like many great places, they weren't always well known and seen as significant. Hear these words from Genesis 12:

“The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.’

“So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

“From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.”

Abram set up camp with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. It seems like such a simple statement. It is merely providing the reader with Abram’s location. After all, the story seems much more real if you can picture the scene, if you knew that Bethel is the home of rich pastures, perfect for herding animals. It would help if you understood how close Bethel and Ai really are, and that the two cities were so close that their leaders often acted in harmony, even when they were each ruled by a separate king. Telling you, the reader and hearer of this story, Abram’s location is very interesting and helpful, particularly if you lived in this time period. But to stop with those observations is to miss the importance of the phrase “with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.”

Bethel is comprised of two Hebrew words...*bayit*, meaning “house” and *el*, meaning god in a very general sense, but also in this case addressing the God of the Hebrews. So Bethel is the house of God. Bethel is one of the most sacred places in all the Old Testament.

While the writer of Genesis refers to Bethel in the story of Abram, it actually doesn’t receive that name until Jacob had a certain dream. You probably remember the story. Jacob is running away from his brother, who’s trying to kill him, and Jacob gets tired. So he leans against a rock and falls asleep. Once asleep he dreams of a large staircase, or as it is sometimes incorrectly translated a ladder. Angels are going up and down on the staircase and above it all appears God. Because of this dream, the place is called the House of God or Bethel. From the story of Abram and Jacob, Bethel becomes a very sacred place for the Jewish people.

Prior to Abram, there were no Jews. Abram was the very first Jew. So it is significant that Abram built an altar at Bethel. This is one of the first places where the father of their nation worshipped and glorified God. This is one of the first places where the Jewish people worshipped God.

Where were you when you first encountered God? Where were you when you first knew that God loved you and cared about you? Where were you when you first truly worshipped God, when hymns were more than songs or scripture became more than just a story or your prayer truly became a conversation? Do you remember that place?

When I was fairly young, my parents had decided that I wasn't old enough to take communion. They wanted me to be old enough to have some idea of what was happening. They wanted it to be more than snack time with a little piece of bread and a tiny cup of grape juice. So, they wanted me to wait until they thought I was ready. During one particular service, both of my parents were participating in the service, so I was sitting alone. And there was a very wonderful and well-meaning woman who was not aware of my parents' reservations about communion. She thought it was important that I participate, and so I went up the center aisle and took my first communion. To say the least, my parents were not thrilled. As soon as we got home, they sat me down and tried to help me understand a little bit about communion. It was during those events that I came to better understand two things...first, God wants all to come into his presence. God welcomed me at his table, even though I didn't really understand what I was doing there. And second, those sacred objects, like communion elements or baptismal water, have deep meanings and are worth trying to understand. I'm sure I'm saying that now much better than I could have articulated when it actually happened, but the essence of those truths were seeds just beginning to sprout. Because of that event, the act of communion, sharing the bread and the cup with others in the presence of God, is forever one of my most sacred spaces.

Having sacred places is important to Christians. We have sacred scriptures, sacred places of worship, and even sacred acts, like baptism and communion. Of course, with sacred places being so important to us as Christians, we should probably define what makes a place sacred. I think there are five things that make a place sacred.

One. A sacred place is somewhere where we expect to meet God. Bethel is important to the Jews because people like Abram and Jacob met God there. Throughout Jewish history we find that the prophet Samuel wanted to judge legal and religious cases at the city of Bethel, because that was somewhere that God had been before, and the people expected God to be present there again. Surely, there are places you go where you expect to be in the presence of God. Every Sunday morning, we have an invocation, a prayer calling for God to be present in this place.

Two. A sacred place is somewhere where we worship God. Humans are created to worship. All humans worship. Some may worship nature, others magnificent art, and some others even worship themselves. Humans are created with a need and a desire to worship. The hope of our Creator is that we will worship him. So just being in a place that has God's presence is not enough. You and I can sing hymns and never once mean a word we utter. We

can pray the Lord's Prayer and still be thinking about that movie we're going to watch tonight. I think it is worth noting that Abram went to Bethel with the express purpose of worshipping God. In fact, worship was such an integral part of Bethel that Jeroboam, a king of Israel, even placed idols in the city. Fortunately, another Israelite king had the wisdom to remove them.

Three. A sacred place is somewhere where we find rest. It is no accident that Jacob slept at Bethel. There is nowhere better to find safety and rest than in the presence of God. When I was in seminary, I was serving a church that was about an hour away. So a couple times a week I would have to make the commute to the church building. And the car became one of my most sacred places. I would cruise down the road, singing along with a Christian radio station, and talking to God. It was the perfect place to find peace for a busy day. It was the perfect place for life to slow down for a few minutes. Are there places where you find peace in God? Are there places where you find rest, knowing that God loves you and cares for you?

Four. A sacred place is somewhere where we are challenged and transformed because of God. God made you in his image, but because of sin, we are a poor reflection of the Creator who crafted us. There's an old Christian saying that God loves you as you are. And it is true—God does love you as you are, but he doesn't ever want you to stay there. God wants you to spend time with him and become more loving and graceful and righteous. God wants you to become more like himself, a more complete image of who he created you to be. During his dream about God, Jacob comes to realize that God will give him and his descendents the land of Canaan. It begins to change how he views his life and the lives of those around him. However, it does take several years of growing up in his faith before he truly understands God's call on his life.

Five. A sacred place is never a place where we can stay forever. It can be tempting. Once you truly feel the presence of God, you will want to stay there forever. But the God we serve is a seeking God. God sought us out in the form of Jesus. God could have stayed in heaven and shouted for us to follow him, but Jesus came to us to love us and claim us. Bethel once again provides rich examples. Verse eight tells us that Abram made an offering. Verse nine tells us that he moved on to another place. Jacob does the same thing. He anoints a nearby rock with oil, and then he moves on. God meets us in our sacred place, but we aren't free to stay there. We come together as the Body of Christ on Sunday morning, but God says go into all the world. God calls us to his sacred places and then tells us to leave, and tell others about the changes we've experienced, the rest we've received, the worship we've shared, the God we've met. Sacred places are not for us to make our homes. Instead, they are like Bethel; they are God's home, a house of God, where we are invited to visit frequently and invite God to travel with us.

So, where is the place where you can find God? I hope it's here in this church in this worship service, but I hope there are other places where you can study and pray. I pray that as we begin this study of sacred places over the next few weeks, you will find your Bethel, your places to meet God. Because I have a secret for you, God very much wants to meet with you. So, spend some time this week and in the weeks to come finding somewhere where you can meet God. Intentionally, set aside some time to be in God's presence. Do it as a family. Do it

in a small group. Do it alone. Just find a sacred place where you can encounter God. God is waiting for you.