

Remembrance Sunday 2015

Rev. Alida Ward

Genesis 28: Jacob's Ladder

Two Sundays ago, I got the chance to teach our 7th grade Church School class. Chris Tormey, their teacher, who hardly ever misses, was going to be away; and David was preaching that day, so I was the sub.

I got up early that morning, went out and bought donuts, a shameless ploy to purchase the class' affection -- also, I *like* donuts.

The scripture Chris had left for me to teach was the story of Jacob and Esau, twin brothers who had a huge falling out in their teen years, bad enough that Jacob had to leave home, run away.

And in Genesis, chapter 28, Jacob is out in the middle of nowhere, alone and scared, missing his mom.

And darkness falls.

And this is what happens:

Jacob curls up on the ground, with a stone for his pillow, and he sleeps the sleep of the exhausted. And he dreams.

He dreams of a ladder,

a ladder lowered down to him from heaven,

and on that ladder angels going up and down,

touching the earth beside him, then dancing back up the rungs to heaven.

And Jacob wakes up and says,

"What is this place? This must be the gate of heaven."

Weird dream, said the kids, when we finished reading it.

Angels running up and down a ladder? What's that about?

So I said to them -- grab a donut, kids, we're going for a walk.
And we did. The seventh graders and I went out the front door of the Church House,
down to the end of the playground wall,
and onto the path that leads to our Memorial Garden ...
that two acre oasis of beauty that lies tucked behind our buildings.
Why are we here? they asked.
You'll see, I said.
I led them to a stone wall.
There are names on this wall, one of them said;
yes, I said, their ashes are interred here.
And for a bit we were quiet, and the kids walked along and read the names,
ran their fingers over the engravings.

I brought you out here, I said to the kids,
because out here you can *feel* heaven's ladder touching earth.
This is where the angels come running up and down.
All around you now are the names of people who were loved in this church:
Jeanne and Ann and Beth, Emma and Len, Phil and John and George.
And when we stand out here we remember how near to us they still are,
how alive they still are.
We feel them coming down the ladder to us.
This is our gate of heaven, I said.
The kids nodded. "Cool," they said. And we walked back inside, a little quieter.

I knew where to take the kids to show them that story,
because in fact *whenever* David and I gather with a family in the Garden
to place into the walls the ashes of someone we loved,
that's the scripture I share:
I share the story of Jacob's ladder.
And time and again we have stood by those walls and wept and remembered,
and smiled and prayed,

and felt the angels dancing down the rungs to us,
felt the nearness of God's own love,
felt the presence of those whom we cherished and who cherished us.
And it has felt like heaven's gate.
Out there in that Garden,
you *can* feel the brush of angel's wings.
Walk out there sometime,
run your fingers across the names,
and sense heaven's ladder touching earth beside you.

But the truth is, of course,
that though the Garden makes Jacob's beautiful dream so very real,
the truth is that that ladder touches earth *wherever* we are,
that angels run down it to touch us wherever we go.
In truth, we are always surrounded by the love of those who are lost to our sight
but not from our hearts.
What is promised to us is true:
that though their lives among us have ended,
their lives have not ended;
that those we cherished *never* die.
They are alive to us in ways that I have felt,
that you have felt:
a thought that seems to come from nowhere,
a sudden inexplicable sense of someone's presence,
music, taste, scent that brings a memory so strong it makes you gasp,
a touch or whisper that only you seem to feel, only you hear.
Time and again, heaven's ladder plants itself on earth beside us,
and angels run down it to touch our shoulder
and whisper to us: I am here. I am still here.

This week, I stumbled across this phrase,
a sentence which in this week of remembrance caught at my heart.

It was this:

*Loved ones go no further from us than to God,
and God is very near.*

Loved ones go no further from us than to God ...
and God is very near.

In just a moment, in our time of prayer,
we will name before God the names of loved ones
who in this past year have slipped the surly bonds of earth
and walk now in the light of God.

And as we name them,
give thanks for love that cannot die,
for life that does not end.

And believe that at our feet are the rungs of a ladder that reaches to heaven,
and on it are our angels.

Know that they have gone no further from us than to God –
and God is very near.