

SPR | July 19, 2020 | The Rev. Catherine Healy

Jacob's Ladder, Praying at Home

I have to admit it is disappointing to be preaching to you on video this week, because I had so hoped this would be the day it was finally safe to return to in-person worship in our church building. I am very confident that it was the right decision to postpone, but I'm feeling some real grief about that, and I imagine that many of you are, as well.

We have so much desire to be together, to see each other's faces, to hear each other's voices in real time—and to be back in the beautiful space that we know and love as sacred, in our holy place.

And that *will* happen. We don't know when, but it's coming.

In the meantime, I thought I would give you a little tour of this holy place I have tried to carve out in my house. And when my family moved in here, Heather, my wife, and I both looked at this space, which is a little cupboard under and above the stairs of our building, and I immediately saw it as a prayer room, and she immediately saw it, correctly, as the only good storage place in the house. So we compromised, and it is both. I'm going to spare you the vision of what you can't see in this room, stacked around me, which are kitchen supplies and some boxes of cat litter and some wrapping paper and our tool box ... there's a lot of storage happening under this table and propped up on the sides. But on the table, it's just a holy place. And I really believe that you can make holy places wherever you are.

What is here in my holy place is a framed piece of calligraphy that says, in Latin, "Praise God, all you nations and all you peoples"; some devotional candles—right now we have Mary, Our Lady of Fatima, and St. Michael; and a little icon of St. Catherine, my name saint, as well as a few other things. So we of course have the Book of Common Prayer ready to hand; we have a Bible; we have the St. Augustine's Prayer Book, which is a little jewel of Anglo-Catholic devotion that has been a treasure to me in my own devotions; and, lately, we have what I have been holding during my private prayer time: this little wrench, which reminds me that I may not know exactly what we are fixing or building together, but God has given us all the tools we need. That, we can trust.

And this week, I was sitting in this little holy storage place and thinking about Jacob, and about the amazing experience he had: the vision of the angels climbing the ladder,

the realization that God was in that place—and the rituals that he invented on the spot to *show* that it was a holy place. Because it already was one.

He didn't need to make it holy. It was holy because of what had happened there.

There is so much in that story and throughout the Book of Genesis about our relationship to place and space and land, and what makes our spaces holy—what gives an attachment to things like worshiping in our church building, and how we can replicate that when we can't be in that space. We know that the land that we live on and the land our church building is on was not always what it is now, or controlled by the people who control it now. Chicago is on land that was holy to the Peoria and Miami and Potawatomi peoples long before any non-Indigenous settlers arrived on the land. They had, and still have, holy places. And those places never stopped being holy.

Then others came along, and built Redeemer, and built St. Paul, and eventually merged them into one place at 50th and Dorchester. And that place, too, is holy because of what has happened there: Because of the generations that have prayed there, and broken bread together, and shared in the sacraments and asked for God to bless their community.

That's why we miss it. Not because the building is cool—although it is—and not because it's a wonderful place to see friends—although it is—but because it's a holy place, and we know that God has done important things there.

Since we will be at home for a while longer, I think it's time for us to be like Jacob and think about rituals that will help us to remember that God is working wherever we are, and that every place can be a holy place. So you may be like me and have lost the battle about your storage closet, but I wonder if there is a place in your home that could be set aside and made holy to remind you that everything God has created is holy. It could be as simple as a little napkin that you lay out on your nightstand with a candle on it. A chance to pray: Something visual to remind you that even when we can't do all the things that make our life and our worship life feel normal, God is still working. God is still giving us the tools.

And to help us be like Jacob—finding ways through ritual, even very simple ritual, to make our own homes into *Bethel*—the home of God.

Jacob is a very encouraging figure to me, because if you look at the Gospel and Jesus' harsh words about the wheat and the weeds, the children of God and the children of the evil one, Jacob's story doesn't make it immediately clear which one he is supposed to

be. He doesn't start out as one of the good guys in Genesis. He is cunning and sneaky, willing to trick even his own family members to get what he wants.

At the beginning of his story, Jacob is only out for himself, and by the end, he becomes selfless. He will do anything for his children. He wrestles with God, and he is granted dreams and visions and the knowledge that God is where he is, and that transforms him.

Which makes me feel like although this Gospel reading sounds so scary, maybe there's more hope than we think. Maybe we are not predestined to be children of God or children of the evil one, but rather, we can transform. And we will all have moments like Jacob where we are our worst selves, but we also get the chance to be something a little bit better—to grow more into the full stature of Christ and the fullness of what God has built us to become.

To turn from people who are out for ourselves, like Jacob, into people who can see angels, who can recognize God's presence and allow it to change us.

It is now looking like we may be in some form of quarantine for much longer than any of us thought. And that could be cause for hopelessness, but I'm instead trying to think about it as a creative challenge. This is not a temporary pause on real life; this *is* real life. And that means that we have the chance to think about how we can be the good seed, even in a world that looks very different than it did since months ago. How can we work for justice? How can we be the most ethical actors possible, even while we're at home? While we're worshiping and working and doing everything else from inside our homes?

I believe that we have the power to be creative in figuring that out. I am excited that our church has the chance to figure it out together. And if you're looking for one small step to take in that direction, can I suggest that finding a place to pray is a good place to start?