

How Do We Place Hope in the Future?

Friends (long-time and newer), the Love that is God gathers us here and now – here on land we know and love as People's Park, recognizing that many native peoples and other species have loved it for millennia before us; and now on this eighth Sunday in the long green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of our church year. Let us pray:

Ever-present, ever-powerful Love: stir our minds and our hearts as we listen and watch for your presence in and through our lives – granting us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things that we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

I post the manuscript of my sermon each week on our website and on our public Facebook page. In the past year, I had a long-time friend comment 'Are your sermons always this short?' Well, this one won't be. How do we place hope in the future? How do you do so within your particular life journey? How do we do so as a merging community? These questions made spiritual sense to me a week ago when I first reviewed our scripture readings for today.

Ever since childhood, when I would hear the story of Jacob's ladder dream annually in my Lutheran grade school, I have always been struck by the visual depiction of Jacob's dream – replete with a ladder stretching from Earth toward heaven, carrying angelic messengers and the voice of God.

As my church office colleague Megan and I homed in on an artistic rendering for the cover of today's worship bulletin, my sense of wonder was rekindled by the bright opening toward the top of the ladder.

We are traveling a ladder of our own as two beloved congregations merging to become one. We are collectively anticipating the future, which we envision as vibrant, strong, and sustainable. Are we there yet? No, yet we are on our way. Do we know what precisely what our shared reality will look like (and feel like) beyond the rungs of the ladder we can currently see? No.

The question ‘how do we place hope in the future?’ was inspired by the image of Jacob’s ladder, by our contemporary experience of merger, and by words from the Apostle Paul in today’s reading from the book of Romans. I’ll share a few of his words again:

“We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit - we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance.”

Patient endurance and honest groaning will likely be key components in any genuine efforts we make toward placing hope in the future as it pertains both to our individual lives and our collective life. However, in recent days, my interest has shifted. I wonder: **How will we build trust in God, one another, and ourselves as we move in the present and toward the future?**

As I shared in our Mid-Week e-newsletter, I have been listening to an audiobook of Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts*. Having taken copious notes, these words continue to stand out for me – from Brené Brown: *“Trust is earned in the smallest moments - not through heroic deeds or highly visible actions but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection.”*

Back to the story of Jacob – fourteen years ago, I found myself in transition. I had made up my mind to diverge from a career path as a bilingual elementary school teacher. I had begun to feel the stirrings of a call to ministry and seminary studies. I often return to words of advice my father offered to me at that juncture in my life: *“Be sure you know what you’re running toward and not just what you’re running from.”* It felt like advice worth holding on to. I ask each of us this morning: from what, if anything, are you moving away? And toward what are you moving?

Perhaps your movement away or toward pertains to a relationship, a habit or practice, an aspect of your personal identity.

In today's reading from Genesis, Jacob is on a journey. His journey begins with his running away from home in order to escape from the potential wrath of his twin brother, Esau. In the previous chapter, Jacob and his mother Rebekah successfully schemed to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the blessing of the first born (meant for Esau). Jacob was running away from his parents' home in Beer-Sheba; he was running away from his own sin against Esau and the possibility of Esau responding vengefully.

Toward what was Jacob running? He was running toward a safe haven. He was obeying his mother's command to journey to her brother Laban's home in Haran and to find a wife there among his cousins. He was running toward the next step his mother had in mind for him. Have you ever moved full tilt toward a goal, a relationship, a project, a career, or something else that a family member wanted for you without pausing to discern whether or not it was the right step according to your own wisdom?

"Be sure you know what you're running toward and not just what you're running from." Perhaps, like me, you've made a difficult decision to diverge from one known path in order to pursue another path that was calling to you. Perhaps, like Jacob, you've needed to leave a volatile situation in order to seek shelter and the opportunity to make a fresh start.

We benefit from recognizing both what we leave behind and toward what we reach. We also benefit from pausing in the middle – in the present moment. The pivotal moment in today's story of our ancestor Jacob is the moment in which he pauses. We heard, *"When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there. He took a rock and used it for a headrest and lay down to sleep there. During the night he had a dream..."* The passage continues on to describe his dream of angels moving along a ladder stretching between Earth and heaven.

The dream made space for Jacob to hear the voice of God present with him. God reminded Jacob of the promise of offspring, land and blessings that God made to his grandparents, his parents, and now him. Even more poignant in that moment of utter instability for Jacob was this promise of God: *“Know that I am with you. I will keep you safe wherever you go...”*

Our ancestors in faith have continued to leave spoken and written reminders for each other and for us that God is with us always.

How can we remain open to God’s presence in each moment of our lives, no matter where we perceive ourselves to be on a trajectory of movement and change?

From time to time, I share with you a reading that has been very influential in both my private life as a daughter, sister, mother and friend as well as in my public life as an outdoor ministry professional, a public-school teacher, a pastor. It comes from an essay entitled *“The Transformation of Fear,”* by twentieth century North American psychologist, author and teacher, Danaan Parry.

The author speaks to the zones of transition we experience in life and the deep trust that living in the present moment requires. He was appreciated internationally for his work in conflict resolution and particularly for his approach and practice of seeing the humanity in an opponent. I will share an abridged version of the reading this morning. I invite you to welcome these words to speak to your experience of our communal moment of growth as a merging congregation or to a transition in your private life. *“Fear of Transformation,”* by Danaan Parry.

“Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I’m either hanging on to a trapeze bar, swinging along; or, for a few moments, I’m hurtling across space in between bars. Most of the time, I’m hanging on to my trapeze bar of the moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I’m in control of my life.

But once in a while, I look ahead of me into the distance and I see another bar swinging toward me.

It's empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me.

I know that I must release my grip on the present, well-known bar to move to the new one. Each time, I am filled with terror. Each time, I am afraid I will miss. But I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer an alternative.

And so I soar across the dark void. It's called transition. I have noticed that in [many] culture[s], this transition zone is looked upon as a nothing, a no-place between places that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible. What a waste! The transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Even with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out-of-control that can accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, most expansive moments of our lives. They can also be enlightening, in the true sense of the word. Hurtling through the void, we just may learn how to fly." Wise words from Danaan Parry.

How did Jacob respond to his encounter with God in his dream? The narrative continues: *Then Jacob woke and said, 'Truly, God is in this place, and I never knew it! How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!'*

Let's explore this idea of "the gate of heaven." I believe that we each have unique gates, portals, thresholds to heaven. What do we mean when we imagine heaven and use the word heaven? Here are the three most common meanings of the word per Merriam Webster dictionary: *"the expanse of space that seems to be over the earth like a dome; the dwelling place of the Deity and the blessed dead; a spiritual state of everlasting communion with God."* While I feel these are all rich meanings of the word heaven, I want to focus on heaven as *"a spiritual state of everlasting communion with God."*

Let's talk about gates. See in your mind's eye a particular physical gate you've opened, moved through, perhaps let close behind you. [Pause] To where did that gate lead? [Pause] When I think of gates, I think of my parents' gardens laden with green, growing things ready to be enjoyed. Sometimes, you need to know just the right way to release the latch on a gate. Do you have one of those sensitive gates in your life (metaphorically perhaps)?

The gate to a garden, a yard, a parking ramp, a playground, a theme park, the boarding area in an airport... We know gates to many places. How about the gate to heaven – the gate, portal, threshold to *a spiritual state of everlasting communion with God*? I used to think of everlasting as having a starting point and reaching outward beyond the here and now, without an end point. But *everlasting communion with God* actually means God being with us wherever we go during our lifetimes and eternally, beyond space and time as we know them.

Rev. Kathryn Matthews retired from serving as Dean of the Amistad Chapel at the national offices of the United Church of Christ when they were located in Cleveland, Ohio. She draws connections between Jacob's experience of heaven (that is, communion with God) and our potential experiences of communion with God. Matthews writes:

"Jacob senses God's presence dwelling among us when he marks and re-names this holy place "Beth-El," the house of God, the gate of heaven, an awesome place... And yet, it's not only this place: we hear in God's promise something more, something new, for God promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes... As his descendants in faith, we too experience God in more places than church buildings, no matter how beautiful or inspiring they are. We may have a place in nature, or a quiet spot in our home, or maybe we have unexpectedly stumbled upon sacred ground in the most unexpected places... What are the promises we hear? What are the dreams that we dream there?" Words from Rev. Kathryn Matthews.

I imagine that our gates to heaven are as varied and unique as are personhoods are.

I have been learning about self-empathy and I think we definitely need to have self-empathy in order to recognize and open our particular gates to heaven.

Empathy is this: *“the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another”* (merriam-webster.com). I hope that we have all been encouraged to develop empathy. That encouragement may have come from a parent, a grandparent a sibling, a teacher or a mentor.

“Self-empathy is a process in which we bring our attention and focus to ourselves and listen with kindness to the feelings and needs arising in us” (radiantmama.com). *“Self-empathy is a process in which we bring our attention and focus to ourselves and listen with kindness to the feelings and needs arising in us.”*

As we move deeper in our merger process, I have been thinking about this resource, *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, by Episcopal theologian and seminary professor Corinne Ware. She offers a four-part typology, asserting that people lean heavily toward one spiritual type while experiencing all four to some degree or another.

Keeping self-empathy in mind, I believe that if each of us *brings our attention and focus to ourselves and listens with kindness to the feelings and needs arising in us*, we will recognize which spiritual type we each lean toward. And then we can seek out experiences that will engage our particular spirituality in ways that empower us to open our gates to communion with God.

So I will quote briefly from Corinne Ware to provide you with an introduction. I invite you to close your eyes if you wish as you listen for yourself. As you listen, I invite you into self-empathy – *bringing your attention and focus to yourself and listen with kindness to the feelings and needs arising in you.*

Head spirituality – *This is an intellectual “thinking” spirituality that favors what it can see, touch and vividly image... Their choices will be based mostly on activity and on corporate gathering: more study groups, better sermons, and some sort of theological renewal within the worshipping community... The contribution of head spirituality to the whole... produces theological reflection and crafts position papers on ethical issues. It supports education and publication and causes us to examine the texts of our hymns to see if we are singing what we actually believe... Prayer in this quadrant is almost always word-based prayer, whether aloud or silent. That is head spirituality.*

Heart spirituality – *Here, the transformational goal is that of personal renewal... Heart spirituality prayer is made with words but the words are used less formally than with head spirituality, and praying is usually extemporaneous... These people focus on personal service to others... Their contribution to the whole is the warmth of feeling, energy and freedom of expression others sometimes lack... They often need permission to acknowledge anger, disappointment, sadness, and doubt, and to allow themselves to be less than ideal. That is heart spirituality*

Mystic spirituality – *Here ‘hearing from’ God rather than ‘speaking to’ God is prominent. The aim of [mystic] spirituality is union with the Holy, and, although this is never completely achievable, only the continued attempt... satisfies. People attracted to this type of spirituality are often by nature contemplative, introspective, intuitive, and focused on an inner world as real to them as the exterior one. The mystic spirituality contribution to the whole... is... [that] many in this group write and publish and provide the especially inspirational and uplifting spirituality that fuels our daily lives with a sense of the Holy. These are the people who push the frontiers of spirituality, enabling us to imagine what we might do if we would be open enough. That is mystic spirituality.*

Kingdom spirituality – *Their aim is simply to obey God... Theirs is a courageous and sturdy idealism that takes responsibility for change; they have a passion for transforming society...*

The kingdom spirituality [person] is inclined to be assertive... in desire to implement a vision of the world as the kingdom of God on earth. They equate prayer and theology with action. It is not uncommon to hear statements such as 'My work and my prayer are one,' or 'I pray with my hands and feet.' Their gifts to us are tremendous... They lead us in the difficult... issues. That is kingdom spirituality.

Friends, I wonder if you sense your own leaning toward head, heart, mystic or kingdom spirituality. Remember that all of us engage spiritually (that is, engage with God, self and other) in all four ways. I encourage you to keep listening to yourself. Knowing your dominant spiritual type may facilitate your finding your gate to heaven – particular intellectual readings, personal relationships, contemplative experiences, and justice efforts will assist you in opening that gate. Your assistants will be different than for any other person.

Today, whether you're moving from something like Jacob, moving toward something like Jacob, or doing both consciously; be assured that God is with each and all of us – wherever we go. You will find your gate if you stay open to encountering it and trying out its latch.

I hope that the story of Jacob's overnight stay in a previously unknown spot on his journey between his childhood home his uncle's home reminds us to trust God, ourselves, and one another amidst transitions in our own lives and in our communal life.

I love being a settled pastor. And yet, I engaged in interim ministry training twice in the past decade and have gained from the skills of imagining supporting community in transition. I spoke with the children earlier through the lens of appreciative inquiry. And, indeed, in the coming months we will ask ourselves: what do we already love being and doing? And toward what do we look forward – what is our preferred future? And how are we going to get there? What heart and other resources will be necessary?

Along the way, we will need to trust. So I close, again, with Brené Brown's wise words: "*Trust [among us, will be] earned in the smallest moments - not through heroic deeds or highly visible actions but through paying attention, listening [... listening, listening) and gestures of genuine care and connection.*"

May God's abiding presence uplift each of us, giving us courage and strength to live our lives as reflections of God's love – everywhere we go. Because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Genesis 28:10-19a, Romans 8:12-25