

St. Paul's Congregational Church: July 23, 2017, Proper 11A  
 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, Genesis 28:10-19a,  
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Whether we realize it or not, or take the time to realize it, we all do need some time away from our routines – whatever they are – and take a vacation, a respite from the usual activity. And like some of you, I try to make plans for my vacation – sometimes they work out, sometimes they get a bit derailed. I'd hoped to go to Connecticut to finish the cleanout of my father's house but my brother was also on vacation and had the good sense to go off to God's country in Maine. So the cleanout still needs to be finished. It'll get done...I know that.

I'm the first to admit I don't do well in extreme heat and humidity so I savored those beautiful days my first week off in my gardens – the spring peas are all eaten and I'm now waiting for the beans to form...the cherry tomatoes on my deck rarely make it into my house – those savory bites are even better warm from the sun – and I'm picking awesome little cucumbers from the plant on my deck as well – they sure taste good too! And for the first time I wintered my hibiscus plants inside - I've been rewarded by gorgeous blossoms – lovely shades of pink and yellow. And the gladiolas that keep coming back year after year are beautiful – in my front garden and in vases in my house.

When it got so hot and humid, though, my energy level did drop significantly – but working on Christmas in August planning, clearing out my files, putting together the UCC101 class – going through boxes I'd brought home from Dad's house full of old pictures and memories – all those things were good as well. The concerts on the Bloomfield Green after dinner out with a friend were refreshing too. Wrapping up my vacation time at Ocean Grove for the day with a good friend, putting my feet in the water, enjoying people watching and savoring the quiet in that little town – it was a good respite indeed.

So I'm excited about coming back with some great opportunities for ministry here on the horizon – as I read again the scriptures in preparation for worship this week – in the story of Jacob – one line jumped out at me and has been in the forefront ever since – something so simple, yet so profound, something that we, I think, forget in the routines, the schedules, the tasks, the to-do lists we keep. And I believe it to be just as true for those who are stuck in their homes, perhaps unable to get around easily, whose life long friends are gone now, families live far away or who are estranged – those who live in isolation so much of the time.

That line is Jacob realizing, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place!” And Jacob goes on to make a vow: “The Lord shall be my God.” Like us, Jacob only needs “to say yes to the living God.”

Maybe that's the unexpected gift of my derailed vacation plans: the reminder that God is in all places – and we don't know it. To feel the awe of that realization – to again, say yes to the living God.

This week the Connecticut Conference Spirited Wednesday devotion was a reflection by the Rev. Alison Buttrick Patton called “Road Trips and God Sightings.” Her words are so worth sharing:

“How is it that we encounter God in out-of-the-way places, but so often miss God on our own home turf? You travel to some holy site; touch the stone and hope your prayers will be carried to God’s ears by winged messengers on an invisible escalator. All the time, God is sitting at home in your kitchen, drumming Her fingers on the counter and wondering how you failed to notice Her on the way out the door this morning.

“Maybe we need road trips to escape the email and dodge the laundry piles long enough to clear our vision. Maybe we have more God-sightings on road trips simply because that’s when we’re actually paying attention. We breathe the air and walk along paths that invite us to notice: the feel of the earth under our feet, the sound of wind in trees or water on rocks, the ring of laughter or joyful chatter in the marketplace, or the color of fabric flying in the breeze. At their best, vacations remind us how to keep our eyes peeled and our senses tuned – how to move through our *every* day at a pace that allows us to catch glimpses of the Sacred.

“So visit the holy sites if you like; they may awaken you to God’s presence in a new way. But realize that God may be blessing some ordinary hiking trail in your home town, while you are pouring oil over stones in a distant land.

“Realize, too, that in the end it’s God who finds us, and not the other way around.

“So take note of the morning you wake up after a surprisingly peaceful sleep, awash in a sense of well-being. You grope for your glasses, head for the shower, or reach for that cup of coffee. As your head clears, it dawns on you: something sacred has occurred here. “Huh,” you think. “It seems God was in this place, and I did not know it.” You hurry back upstairs and anoint your pillow, the night stand and the bedspread for good measure. As for God? God has already moved on, ready to meet you somewhere else, wherever you – and the world around you – are in need of a blessing.” She ends her reflection with a prayer: Everywhere God: open my eyes, my ears, my heart to signs of you, wherever I travel and in my own backyard. Amen.

And that prayer has become a challenge to me these past few days as the goings on in Washington DC and in our country has been relentless with bad news, a lack of integrity, a sense for me of the loss of concern for the least of these, fear over the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons – I need to remember that God is always with us – to feel an awe and wonder for that - and then remember that God calls us to be a blessing to others.

Again, I came across a reflection by Sojourners Magazine entitled “Our Daily Moment of Awe” that touched that challenge. Joe Kay writes:

“Standing on a beach at sunset makes me feel small and important at the same time. When I’m watching the sunset, I feel connected to the creator and fully alive.

“When I was home in Cleveland for a few days, I went to the beach to watch the sunset. People splashed in the waves and laughed as the sunset performed its kaleidoscope magic. Their joy washed over me, too. I really needed that awe and wonder moment.

“The last six months have been grueling. The daily attempts to take health care from millions, cut services to the needy, and trash the earth have taken a toll on us all. A

sense of fatigue sets in on those of us who feel a divine call to protect the vulnerable, fight injustice, and treat God's creation as sacred.

“One of my friends compares it to background noise, a daily undercurrent that can slowly drain our energy, inspiration, and courage if we allow it to happen. We need daily moments of awe and wonder to rejuvenate and recharge us — especially now.

“If we lose our enthusiasm and start going through the motions, we're not much good to anyone — including ourselves. Our love is diminished when we lose our sense of connectedness to the source of love, awe, and wonder. Our lives are diminished, too.

“The gospels describe Jesus spending time in solitude to pray and recharge. He needed to get away from daily demands and reconnect with God. After reconnecting with the source, he returned to doing what he was meant to do — heal, love, teach, and transform.

“Those holy moments of reconnection aren't only about God and me. They're also about you and me. They reconnect us to one another.

“I was reminded of those connective properties a few years ago while I was walking along the Siesta Key beach in Florida as the sun was setting. Dozens of people were enjoying the moment with me; some were jogging and others walked along listening to their music.

“We were in our own minds until the people ahead of me stopped and pointed toward the gulf. I stopped and looked as well. A pod of dolphins was playing in the sunset-tinged waves, splashing about in a way that made me smile. Soon, most of the people on the beach stopped to watch and marvel together. It was a true moment of collective awe.

“Our sense of awe overcame our differences and brought us together. This diverse group of people — different ages, different backgrounds, different religions, different political outlooks — stood together and shared a moment of wonder.

“Let's make more moments like this happen. Let's make the effort every day to get out of the clutter in our brains and pay attention to the miracles that are all around us and within us. And let's not just enjoy those moments by ourselves; let's share them with others and revel in them together, reaffirming our interconnectedness in the miracle life.

“Let's set aside time each day for a little shared awe and wonder.”

This church is a “base camp” for us, isn't it — a place of safety where we are fed and rested for the journey and work outside our walls. But we can get stuck in a trap too — perhaps we see ourselves as always at work here. Yes, there's lots to be done. But....let's not miss the encounters with God that can happen at any time, anywhere, in so many places and times of blessing in our ministry, in our worship, in our rest and in our time together at fellowship. Holy connection! That's why we're here isn't it! To encourage encounters with God. To be empowered to share the blessings we have in real abundance.

This week we had the first meeting of the Nutley Family Service Bureau transition group preparing to move the Food Pantry and Distribution here — we toured our building and it was awesome to see the juices flow in all those present — it's going to be a lot of work for sure — but what a team we have! We will continue to feed hungry Nutley families through this transition — and it's wonderful to know that St. Paul's is part of that. God was with us on Thursday and will continue to be with us through this whole process. And I'm so looking forward to Christmas in August as well — taking a risk to open our

doors in a new way. Shared awe and wonder – we can do this! We will do this! And there's a part for everyone!

Let's let our creative juices flow as we look for ways to enhance our ministry, our presence in Nutley, and share the blessings we have all received from God here at St. Paul's. God is leading us today and into tomorrow.

During these slower days of the summer, let's open our eyes, open our ears, open our hearts – see and feel and know that God is with us – surely God is in this place – in all places – even in Washington DC, in the halls of Congress. God waits for us, is present to us, no matter where we are. Believe that! Hang on to that! Celebrate that! Share that good news!

Let us pray: Everywhere God: open my eyes, my ears, my heart to signs of you, wherever I travel and in my own backyard. Amen.