

TITLE: The Church Lives On!

TEXT: "This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."

Genesis 28:17

PREACHED: August 9, 2009, Bethel Presbyterian Church

THE CHURCH LIVES ON!

I suppose it is no secret why I chose this particular passage as a text for my sermon. For it tells the story of why Jacob named the place where he spent the night "Bethel," a Hebrew word, meaning "the house of God." Jacob called it that because he said "Surely the Lord is in this place!"

Why did this congregation choose the name of Bethel?

One might suppose it was because this is such a beautiful place, this lovely valley surrounded by such awe inspiring peaks as Cold Mountain, Mt Pisgah and Lickstone Ridge. Surely God must live in such a place! And that may be why they chose the name of Bethel.

But Jacob did not name the first "Bethel" that because of the beauty of the place. He named it because that was where he met God.

Jacob spent the night there because he was on the lam. He was running for his life. He had done a terrible thing. He had deceived his father and cheated his brother, Esau. In fact Esau was so angry he wanted to kill Jacob

The sun had set as Jacob came to a desolate place. So he spent the night there with a rock for a pillow. And during the night he dreamed. He dreamed he saw a ladder or a stairway to heaven. And God came down the stairway and stood beside him. I think it says something about the character of Jacob that God had to tell him who he was. "I am Yahweh, he says, the God of your granddaddy Abraham and your daddy Isaac."

God found Jacob. Jacob had not come there looking for God. Judging by what he had done, Jacob was not what you might call a godly person. In fact he might have thought of this desolate place as "God forsaken." But Lo and behold God was there!

And God promises him he is going to give him land and lots of it, and children and lots of them. Before this Jacob had thought he had to fight for what he got in life, to lie and cheat and steal.

And now God tells him he is going to give it to him, not because he was so deserving but solely because of grace. This wasn't the merit system. It is something the world has a hard time understanding. It was grace. And God says he is going to bless the whole world through him and his children. Bless the world through a crook like Jacob? Yet that is what He says.

God make three promises.

The first is that he will be with him, wherever he goes, whether he is awake or sleeping.

The second is that he will keep him. God will protect Jacob. He will not let his foot be moved.

Thirdly, he would bring him home again. Those of you, who have moved away, know how it is nice to come home again. There is something about returning to the place where you grew up.

But something we may want even more is to come back home to our family, not just physically, but to be reconciled to those from whom we have been estranged. How pleasant it is says the psalmist when we can live together in unity!

Jacob was at odds with his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him. To be reconciled with those we have offended is another kind of grace that I think we would all like to have.

When Jacob finally did come home some years later, he was so afraid of what Esau might do that he sent him present after present. But, much to his surprise, Esau hugged his neck and kissed him. They both cried. What a blessing that kind of reunion is. May we all know that kind of grace!

Yet, I suspect we all have known that kind of grace in one way or another. And that is what has brought us back to this place. This place called Bethel.

That is we have all experienced a “Bethel” in our lives - a time when God appeared to us even though we may not even have been looking for him.

We have known a time when God showed his goodness to us when we were still undeserving. We have known times when we were in crisis, perhaps in danger of losing our lives, or some other serious trouble and God intervened, not because we were good but because He is good. Not because we were deserving, but because he is gracious.

We may have experienced that grace thru persons who came into our lives and treated us better than we deserved. It may have been a Sunday school teacher like Florence Garner, or a church elder like C. S. Rollins or someone like Lucy West or Nellie McCracken.

I experienced grace at the hands of this congregation. Coming here straight out of seminary, I had a lot of things to learn. This congregation was understanding and forgiving. You treated me with grace!

God became flesh in Jesus, but he also takes fleshly form in other persons through whom his grace and love can and does shine.

What I am trying to say is that though the Bethel Presbyterian Church as a congregation no longer exists, the Bethel Presbyterian Church that is part of the Body of Christ lives on in the hearts and lives of all of you who experienced the grace of Christ through the ministry of this church. And by ministry, I don’t mean just the ministers of this congregation, but the whole congregation, for ministry is what all of us are called to do.

Thank goodness this historic structure still stands. But even if it were to cease to exist, the church still lives on.

I remind you that for fifty years, this congregation existed without a building of its own. For a church is not a building, it is not an institution, as John Calvin taught, it is basically an invisible church that lives in the hearts of all those touched by the grace of Jesus Christ.

This church lives on also, in the congregations it helped to start, at Waynesville, Canton, and Hazelwood.

As James Newsome writes in *Texts for Preaching*, “We constitute ourselves for worship in a church that exists independently of any particular building and which will continue to exist even if that particular (building) should tumble into ruins.”

When we come to the communion table, we come as members of different congregations, but we all come as members of the body of Christ, as persons who met God in many different and often unexpected places and experienced grace that, like Jacob of old, while we were yet sinners, he loved us.

This is what “Bethel” is all about, a time when God came into our lives and transformed us so that we could go home again. At Bethel, we became reunited with God through grace and reconciled with each other

“How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!”