

“HOW AWFUL IS THIS PLACE!”

Genesis 28:17

Twenty-five years ago I put some words of welcome out in the narthex. They are from Jacob’s dream. They are, “This is the House of God – this is the gate of Heaven”. I left out – however – six other words from the text: “What an awful place this is!”

I probably should have put them up also, for sometimes Christians do seem rather awful. When I was a little boy the sanctuary seemed huge and stark and dark and dismal. Indeed it might be appropriate on the basis of what the word “awful” has come to mean in recent years, and it would certainly be appropriate on the basis of what it originally meant to put this part of the text in the entrance of my church.

In recent years, the word “awful” has come to mean “distasteful”, “unpleasant”, even “shocking”, and young Jacob could well have meant all of this. On the night of his famous dream, he was certainly in a bitter, most distasteful situation. He was fleeing, “In a burnt, ashen land, where no shrub grew” – in a desolate, barren, alien, desert country, (have you ever spent the night in a tent?) with a rock under his head for a pillow and around him, threatening him like “the cruel and curious demons of the air”, huge stones, piled high one upon another in an encampment, as though they were ladders going up into the sky. It was, in short, a perfect place to see visions, just the spot for a nightmare, especially since he was young – a delayed adolescent if ever there was one, alone, and not accustomed to it. He, who was his mama’s boy and loved home, loved the tents of home with their safety and softness and their sweet redolent smells of savory stews cooking. Jacob was not hardened to the out-of-doors, not like his brother, Esau. Jacob was not accustomed to being alone. Besides all this, he had always been loved, not hated, accepted, not rejected. But now that he had lied to his father, Isaac, stolen from his twin brother, Esau, and was forced to run, like the thief that he really was, now that he could no longer go back where he came from and was afraid to go on, terror seized him – the terror of

guilt and fear. The poor boy's self-image was radically altered by the events of that day. One day may indeed change your life. He saw himself no longer as the pampered scion of a prominent clan, but as "the wanderer", the exile, the outsider, the runner, the rejected. It was his night for a vision all right. He had every right to say, "What an awful place this is!" – "What a predicament I'm in" – and mean by it all we would mean if we said it today. He was indeed in a shocking situation.

Sometimes I think we are a whole pack of Jacobs. Poets like T. S. Eliot say we too live "in a burnt, alien land", pursued by "the cruel and curious demons of the air". We've made our own demons. We're afraid of carcinogens in the air, feed and water supply, radiation and other "ghosties and goodies" in the environment – etc. We seem capable now, with our little chemistry sets – of damaging and destroying everything from the genes and chromosomes – to the ozone. We are quite literally "scaring ourselves to death". Demons of a different – but even more daemonic kind – Christian doest thou see them?" And we've lost so much of the old, the cozy, comfortable securities of the past, the old safe tent of home seem so far away. And we have not yet arrived at the new, not at the new home of the soul, not yet where we feel safe and secure again. So, we too, like Jacob, are stranded somewhere in between, hounded by guilt and fear, and having nightmares, visions of personal, environmental, or social disaster, or nuclear holocaust. So it is not unusual that our culture has fallen in love with the Jacob figure, and so many of our art forms see us as "the wanderer", the exile, the alien, and above all, the runner, and possibly – "the clown". Our pathetic inability to find ourselves, much less one another, our daemonic self-doubts, our suspicions, our bitter strife – in the hiddenness of the heart, behind the locked door of the family, or openly, on the street, our anxieties – leave us crying aloud, "What an awful place this is!"

But interestingly enough, this is not what Jacob was saying. He might well have said it. His situation called for it. No doubt about it, he was "in an awful pickle", as we would say – lonely, guilty and afraid, in a hostile environment. But when Jacob said it was "awful", he meant something else. In the 1600's "awful" was a good

translation of the Hebrew, for then it meant, “awe-inspiring” or “awesome”, so that an awful place”, was “a place that inspired reverence”. It was a “holy place”. So that it would be most appropriate to put a sign at the entrance of a church sanctuary reading, “This place is an awful place”. In 1611 this would have been a compliment. So when Jacob said: “How awful is this place!” He quite naturally added: “This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” This is a holy place of inspiration – God’s place.

You see, Jacob, in extremes, Jacob, at the end of his rope, Jacob with all his resources exhausted, Jacob in all his guilt and fear, Jacob, as big a rascal as he was, Jacob the wanderer, nonetheless did not dream a dream of despair. He did not get drunk or pop pills. Jacob did not even dream a dream of holocaust destruction. Unlike so many of us in trouble, his dream was not a nightmare.

As unpleasant, as distasteful, as morally shocking as his true situation was, he, Jacob, dreamed a dream of hope in the midst of hell, turning those burnt and ashen stones into stair steps, like a ladder, a ladder of faith, leading up and out of his inferno, “and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it”.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, in our own guilt as individuals, as families, as a society, we are often afraid. Because we are hurt, we hurt one another, and we run. Deliver us, we beseech thee, from the nightmare. And grant us, not because we deserve it, but because we need it, a new vision of faith, faith in each other and above all in thee, that thou art not dead, faith in thy forgiveness and love, that we may forgive and love one another, that we, thy people, may hold thee in true dread, in holy awe, in reverence of thee and thy law, and that this place may be, indeed, “the house of God”, and even “the gate”, at least our Lord, “the (outer) gate of heaven”. This we ask for the sake of him who is our best vision of God, even Christ the Lord. Amen
Let us stand for the benediction.