

Cairns

Rev. John Allen

It never fails that when I teach the confirmation class I always end up thinking about something in a new way. Year after year, the insights of youth astound me. At this point, I shouldn't be surprised.

This past year I gave today's story to our students to read as a part of a larger look at the character of Jacob in the Hebrew Bible.

We broke into a few groups and each got a different episode from Jacob's story to study.

The assignment was to read the story, and come back as a group prepared to talk about how they felt that story related to their life.

And so one group read this story about Jacob's vision of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. He awakens and says "surely God was in this place and I didn't know it." Then he stands up a rock, and goes on his way.

Now I mean what I say when I tell the youth to interpret the text for themselves. The idea is not to find what they think the right answer is, but to really read it and dig in.

But I usually have an idea of what I think is going to come out.

With this story, it was kind of a no-brainer.

I expected something about a time when they encountered God and were surprised. Or something about standing on a hill side and watching the sunset and suddenly realizing that the Earth is in fact crammed full of holiness, and they just had to open their eyes to it.

Something like that.

But no.

When I asked them, “And what part of this story did you feel most connected to?” They were unanimous.

The rock.

The what?

The rock. That Jacob stands up to mark the place.

“Could you say a little more about that?” (That question is like the first thing they teach you in seminary, to be used when the pastor is stymied).

“Sure! It made us think of those piles of rocks that you sometimes see along a path, or a trail. The rocks, all balanced on each other.”

“Sometimes, I like to make one of those in a beautiful spot, to sort of mark how special it is.” Another one chimed in.

“Its like a way you know that someone has been there before.”

Suddenly, I found myself right there. Of course!

I had always skipped past the rock when I was reading that story. I kind of figured it was just being used to make some connection to some famous rock that must have been standing up outside of Bethel. Something that would have been interesting to the ancient audience, but had no meaning to us.

But no! The rock, it turns out, is the most important part!

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Have you ever seen one of those piles of rocks? A little tower. One balanced on the other?

Its called a cairn. C-A-I-R-N. An old gaelic word.

And for thousands of years people have been stacking stones, one, on top of the other, just like that. To mark paths. To mark important places.

It was a custom of the old Scottish Highlands Clans before they fought in a battle, each soldier would place a stone in a pile. Those who survived the battle returned and removed a stone from the pile. The stones that remained were built into a cairn to honor the dead.

There is even an old Scottish blessing, Cuiridh mi clach air do chàrn, "I'll put a stone on your stone".

And so it has been, for a long, long time, that stones stacked up, or stood up, marked something significant.

And it works on me. I don't know about you, but every time I see a small cairn alongside a trail, or on a hilltop, I stop by it. I admire it. I wonder at seeming way that the little stones defy gravity clinging to each other.

Sometimes, if the stack looks really secure, I might go ahead and try to add on.

But they always slow me down.

And I like the way they let me know that someone has been there before.

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It's worth remembering that Jacob was on the run.

He had betrayed his twin brother, stolen the family flocks, and snuck away.

And one night, as he slept, he had a vision, a dream. He saw a ladder that stretched to the heavens with angels ascending and descending.

Tying heaven to Earth, and Earth to heaven. Filling the world with the Holy. And bearing all of the world to the feet of almighty God.

In the midst of all his worries and his fears, his troubles, and his concerns. His scheming and plotting, and striving to keep everything under control.

He had forgotten.

He had forgotten just how close God was all around him. Just how holy, even the ground beneath his feet was.

He had forgotten that God had promised to be with him always, and that God is not in the business of breaking promises.

That is until he saw his vision, angels climbing up from Earth to heaven and back again, a perpetual and unending dance. A reminder that God is all around us. Even now.

And so he woke up, somewhat embarrassed that he had forgotten something so fundamental.

God is here. But I didn't realize it.

I forgot.

So he stood up a stone, and then went on his way.

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I try to imagine now the next person who came by that way. We don't get to read about them, because the camera follows Jacob onward on his journey.

But I wonder about the next person who came by. And saw that stone standing up on end.

I bet they would stop there too.

Kind of like we do when I see a little cairn of stones on the side of a hiking trail.

And I bet that they would stop, and examine the stone stood up on end and feel two things in particular.

Comfort and wonder.

Comfort in seeing what only human hands could have done.

Someone has been here before.

It is not the certainty that would come with a trail marker, an arrow pointing, "this way to camp."

But some comfort in knowing that you are on the trail, or at least on a trail. Somewhere that another has passed by before.

Comfort.

Comfort, and wonder.

I wonder why *they* stopped? Why they took a little time to mark this place? What may have happened here? Is it special?

Our traveler might look up, lifting his eyes of the ground for the first time in a long time and see the beauty of the place. They might pause, in the midst of what had been a hurried journey long enough to hear the birds singing of the first time.

They might quiet their steps. And stop. Maybe just long enough, to see God in that place.

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One of my favorite questions to ask is: “Where have you seen God?”

Over the course of these last few days, where have you seen God. Or, in the midst of this time of struggle, where have you seen God.

Where do you see God in the middle of catastrophe?

Where have you seen God in your life through this day? This season?
This year?

Where have you seen God?

These experiences are often simple. A thing of beauty. A loving embrace. A pleasant surprise. A welcome relief.

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Here's what I want you to do. Next time you have one of those experiences. Don't keep it to yourself.

Even if it seems little. Or, perhaps even if it seems too big that you dare not speak it.

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Tell someone. Tell me. Tell a friend.

Bear witness to those little moments of beauty and grace as often as they come to you.

For one thing, it's never a bad idea to give God a little glory.

But, also, it's like standing up a little stone. A marker. To those who might be on the road with you.

Here. I met God here.

I met God in that kind of moment.

God found me when I was in a crisis like this.

Surely God was in the place, and I hadn't realized.

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Its one way of thinking about what we do here in church.

Standing up little markers, to offer each other the comfort that we are not alone where we stand today.

And to inspire us each to lift our eyes, and open our hearts, and wonder, how God might show up next.