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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Genesis 28: 10-19; Isaiah 54:2  
 November 12, 2017

“Messages along a Sidewalk”

Jacob is on a journey in the story we heard from Genesis. He’s departed from his home, having said goodbye to his mother and his father. He travels alone in territory that is unfamiliar to him. Imagining Jacob’s story, we can envision a sense of estrangement and loss when we meet him, for he knows he can only keep going forward, away from what he knows. The text gives us to imagine that there must have been a struggle within him as well. When he goes to sleep, he uses a stone for a pillow, a way of highlighting his discomfort in that place. We can wonder at Jacob’s choice of sleeping implements. When I go camping if there is so much as a small pebble under my hip, I lay awake most of the night. Nevertheless, Jacob sleeps deep enough to dream. And in his dream he sees a ladder or a stairway extending from earth into the heavens, and on it, spirit beings ascending and descending, passing between those two realities. Standing at the top of that ladder he sees a vision of God, who offers him a message of affirmation and reassurance – the sense that he belongs to that place. When he awakes, he says, “Surely God was in this place – and I didn’t know it.” He then gives the place a name, Beth-el, which means “House of God.”

“Surely God was in this place – and I didn’t know it.” I love that formulation, for the way it opens us to thinking about the spaces and places we inhabit. I love it for the ways it invites us to discern the hidden messages that emerge, dream like, in the spaces we inhabit – in cities, towns, forests, houses, everywhere. And I love it for the ways it invites each of us to work to build such places, or to notice the ways portals between heaven and earth might already exist around us. Ultimately, the story of Jacob asleep on the rock, and his awakening to the divine realities around him, is a story we need as we embark upon a new adventure in providing hospitality here in Old Lyme. My hope this morning is that we’ll be something like Jacob, dreamers who awake, and discover that God is indeed present in this place.

Spaces speak. They communicate in a language that often lies buried in the recesses of the past. I first discovered that from reading Walter Benjamin, a giant of 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history. He was a Jewish literary theorist, a philosopher, and most importantly, a chronicler of urban geographies. In a massive tome called *The Arcades Project*, about the intricate city spaces of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, he includes a fragmentary thought that has reanimated studies of cities, towns, and architecture. He says this: “at the approach of the solitary walker’s footsteps, the city has roused. Speechlessly, mindlessly, its mere intimate nearness gives him instructions.”

It’s a strange passage, but maybe not as strange as you might think. Benjamin is suggesting that when we encounter a place, it’s telling us a story. He’s suggesting that material elements like buildings, and streets, and the flow of traffic, and the movement of other people can be read and deciphered, as if it were a novel or a poem. He’s saying that for those who linger long enough, space and place can begin to whisper in a hushed tone,

revealing truths that aren't immediately perceptible until we're given eyes to see and ears to hear. The intimate nearness of a solitary walker offers instruction.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been awakened by a space, so that it began to speak to you, to tell you stories whenever you drew near? Maybe it's just me – I don't know. But I think of the way people speak about their houses sometimes, or even a room within a house. I think of the way some of us fall in love with a landscape that keeps us returning, or the way philosophers sometimes talk about the "architecture of happiness," the idea that elements within a building really do have the power to affect our emotions or sense of well being. I think about hospitals and schools, and the way those are now being designed to facilitate healing, or new modes of learning. Maybe it's just me, but I do think that the spaces of our lives speak in ways that we may or may not register consciously.

I hadn't really considered that a space was something to be read until Rachael and I spent a couple of summers living in Berlin. It was there that Walter Benjamin's insights exploded across my mind as we explored that city's many neighborhoods. Echoes of the past reverberated everywhere, and I began to hear and see traces of German Romanticism here, the ghosts of World War II there. In one quadrant, the austerity of the East German era could still be seen, while in other sections the dazzling postmodern architecture of embassies and banks and commercial centers bespoke the power of global finance, while in other sectors still a different story was being told, about Turkish and Muslim immigrants and the way they were recreating portions of the city. With Walter Benjamin as my guide, I walked the streets of Berlin, waiting for it to speak in its hushed and whispered tones. They were some of the most intoxicating conversations I've ever been privy to, and I've never stopped wondering about the ways in which the spaces we inhabit tell stories about who we are, and what we value.

Last week I invoked the story of Paul Verryn, our friend and partner in South Africa who provided shelter to some 3000 refugees, all crowded into Paul's Johannesburg church. This week I'd like to invoke another longtime hero of our congregation, along with a space well known to many of you. Today's hero is Clarence Jordan, who knew something about the way spaces speak. Many of you have been to Koinonia Farm down in Americus, Georgia, and you know the story of how, in 1948, at the height of Jim Crow segregation, Jordan created an interracial farming community. Black and white folks lived together, and worked together, and ate together, and prayed together at Koinonia Farm. Jordan called those acres of Georgia soil a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God. It was a space, a built environment that for many was a portal, where heaven and earth, to say nothing of black and white, could touch. During the Civil Rights era, it became legendary as a space in which residents were conducting a bold experiment in the geography of faith.

Not everyone saw it that way, of course. Many days and nights must have been like sleeping on a stone, in a hostile country. Stories are still told about the Klan rolling past Koinonia and opening fire on its houses. Jordan was subjected to scorn among his neighbors, and many within Americus refused to do business with Jordan. The hardest part of the story of Koinonia, for me, is hearing from Jordan's children, now grown adults, and learning of the pain they suffered in school as a result of Jordan's experiment. And yet it was, and is, a demonstration plot. Will Campbell, a spicy civil rights activist and minister, spoke about how visiting Koinonia in that era was like finding a home in a

dry and desolate land. He spoke about how it was like finding God after sleeping on a hard stone. His heart would race, he said, every time he rounded the last bend in the road and the farm came into view. He knew, he said, that he was about to encounter what he called true Gospel living within that space. Every time we visit, I marvel at that place, which became a portal between heaven and earth, and I think about what it means to be such a place. To walk around Koinonia Farm is to hear whispers and sighs, revelations offered in hushed tones. To walk around Koinonia Farm is to open oneself to the way the spaces we inhabit can become portals of the divine.

Which brings me to you. When I first learned of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, I was living in New Haven, and I read of how this place aspired to be a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God. I knew of Koinonia Farm and its history, and my curiosity was piqued. In time I came to know about the many mission partnerships that have thrived in this place, of how a rotating cast of characters from places all over the world found their way to Old Lyme. And I came to know about the Food Pantry that operated within the walls of this place every week, the largest on the Connecticut Shoreline, spilling out onto the streets and sidewalks every Saturday. Later, I came to learn the history of resettling refugees here in Old Lyme, and of inviting families from South Africa and Rwanda to live in the parsonage throughout the years. Later still, I came to hear the rumors of how, once upon a time, a house along Lyme Street was a station along the Underground Railroad. I've since learned that it likely wasn't so. Still, the wish that it were so is instructive. It indicated to me a desire to be such a community in the present. I've loved getting to know those stories, and the way the streets and sidewalks around our church have whispered, at least to me, of the ways this place has been a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God. Those are the whisperings that have led us to pursue our work of welcoming Syrian refugees, and to wait, hoping against hope, that we shall be given the opportunity to welcome still others. We wait, and we hope, instructed by the whispers and sighs of this space that we inhabit.

But here I come to our second text for the morning, this one from the Prophet Isaiah. "Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out," he says. Do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes." It's yet another vision of space and place contained in the Bible. I take that message to be a perennial challenge to individuals and communities such as ours. I take it that we're always being asked to stretch the curtains of our tent, not in terms of property or acreage, but in terms of the openings we create for others to come in. I take it that we're always being asked to enlarge the space of our welcome, especially toward those who construe the world differently. It's not that our tent isn't open – it is, and it always has been. The instruction, however, is to stretch it.

That's precisely what we're doing in our sanctuary project. It's a need that emerged among our neighbors here in Connecticut, some of whom are panicked at what may soon befall them. This past week I received a phone call asking just how ready we are to receive an individual or family threatened with deportation. The question was asked because a particular family may soon make the decision to go into sanctuary, and the caller was wondering if we were as good as our word. I told him we were. Meanwhile, a remarkable thing was happening almost at the very same time I received that call, entirely unbeknownst to me. After preaching last week about the need to prepare for the arrival of a person or family seeking sanctuary, several people got to

work, and found a bed and a mattress and a couch and a little table. On Friday, I learned that a number of people had helped to move that furniture into one of our Sunday School rooms downstairs to prepare a place for whoever may arrive. One of the beautiful things about it was that Kamber Hamou was one of the helpers, himself recently arrived here from Syria. That's the way it seems to run around here. When there's a need, you spring to action. I want you to hear and know how powerful that is. There's a sense of agency around this place that is impressive to behold.

But this needs to be said as well. As with Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farm, as with Jacob of old, we too may have some days and nights when we feel as though we're sleeping on a cold rock, using a stone for a pillow. We too may have moments in which we're uncomfortable and out of our element. I hope not, but that may well be the condition for witnessing the holiness of a particular space. We'll have to be very public about our activities, and so I imagine there will be detractors and critics, both within and without. I hope there won't be many, and I trust it won't be like Clarence Jordan being shunned in Americus for creating an interracial community. But I have no guarantees about that. If Koinonia Farm is any indication, to become a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God is also to court the possibility of disagreement and opposition. If the lessons of Koinonia are accurate, to say nothing of the lesson of Jacob himself, to witness that ladder extending between heaven and earth, and to sense the blessedness of a particular space, is also to struggle within it. It's to feel the press of the cold stone beneath our heads from time to time.

If our text is to be trusted, if the story of Koinonia, which has been told and retold in this congregation over the years, is to be trusted, then the wisdom to be gleaned is this: Risk it. Risk sleeping in strange new territory with a stone for a pillow, for you may wake up to realize that God truly is in this place. Risk becoming a fool for Christ, a fool for the Gospel, for it may be that in so doing, we truly will become a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God. Risk stretching the curtains of your habitation, for the guest you receive may stretch you as well, in ways you can't fully imagine just yet. Risk it.

A concluding image, and a concluding petition. Every week at our 9:00 service, our Sunday School kids form lines at the door of the Meetinghouse, handing bulletins to those who come through the doors. But sometimes they get restless just standing there, and they begin to venture down the steps, looking for those who may be coming, and then running to be the first to hand them a bulletin. I think one of my kids made it half way across Ferry Road in her quest to be the first to greet a church goer, and I'm pretty sure there were a few Sundays that, had someone not intervened, they would have been at people's car doors down by the ice cream shop, handing out bulletins. So ok, it might be a little zealous, but there's something about it that I love, kids tripping over themselves to be the first to welcome people into the doors of the church. They spill out onto the steps, onto the sidewalk, and along the street to draw people into this place. It's an image we need. We'll do it when we welcome new friends into sanctuary. But the petition, really, is this. Be zealous in welcoming others into this work. Be zealous and excited to share what it is we're doing, what it is we believe, who it is we are. Be proud to welcome everyone who enters into this sanctuary, trusting that this can be a place of which people say: "Surely God is in this place."

Spaces speak. Even now the eyes and ears of the future are upon us. Even now, we can anticipate some solitary walker on some distant day drawing near to this place.

And we can imagine the way this space, this place, might speak, as the streets of the city did to Walter Benjamin, and to me. May the instructions whispered onto the sidewalks and streets be this: surely this is, surely this has been, and surely this shall be, a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.