

“Wherever you are is called Here” Genesis 28:10-22
September 25, 2011 the Rev. Michelle Slater

Lost

Stand still.

The trees ahead and the bushes beside you Are not lost.

Wherever you are is called Here,

And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,

Must ask permission to know it and be known.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,

I have made this place around you,

If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven.

No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,

You are surely lost. Stand still.

The forest knows Where you are.

You must let it find you.

It is said that young Native Americans are given some advice by their elders, in case of ever getting lost in the forest. It is that advice that the poet David Wagoner rewrote as poetry, the poem I just read, the poem that is printed at the top of your bulletin. *Stand still. The forest knows Where you are. You must let it find you.*

[quoted in *The Heart Aroused – Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America,*

by David Whyte]

I love this poem. I love it because it reminds me of the place I first came across it, on Whidbey Island in Washington State, where I took a yearlong series of four retreats focused on leadership in times of great change. I love it because it reminds me in particular of one friend I made during these retreats, who at one point found herself lost in the forest on the way to her cabin, in the dark, having forgotten her flashlight. She had us all in gales of laughter the next day as she narrated stopping, remembering the line, “the trees know where you are,” and exclaiming out loud that she wished they would have told her then!

But mostly I love this poem for its call to stillness; to, “don’t just do something; stand there!” For its message that if you find yourself lost in this world, the essential thing do is just stop. Stop what you are doing. Stop running in circles. Stop panicking, worrying, and feverishly planning. Just stop, and breathe. Stop, and look around you and realize that where you are, wherever that is, literally or metaphorically, is a sacred place and sacred space.

Let me remind you about Jacob. He was one of the great ancestors of Jewish and Christian faith. The father of the 12 tribes of Israel and the one for whom they are named “Israel,” and “Israelites.” If there was anyone who was lost in this world, it was Jacob. A grabber and grasper from before he was born, “Jacob is the sort of man who has you checking to be sure

your wallet is still there after he passes by.” [Jason Byassee, *Feasting on the Word*] He has exploited his twin brother’s hunger, and defrauded him of his rightful inheritance, and shamelessly deceived their father to do so.

Now he is truly lost, and on the run. Running for his life from his brother’s murderous rage. Running from the consequences of his actions; running from his responsibilities; running from God; running from himself. When night falls, he finds a place to sleep, an ordinary place, just like any other. And he is given a dream, the vision of a stairway from earth to heaven, with God’s messengers going up and down it.

More than that, he is given the vision of God standing beside him. And God doesn’t condemn Jacob for what he has done. No punishment is threatened; no consequences are mentioned. God doesn’t even say that phrase that every child dreads to hear from their parent: “Jacob, I am *so disappointed* in you.”

No. It turns out, the God of promises does not wait around for people of sufficient moral integrity to work through, for someone squeaky clean to bless. Rather, the biblical God reaches down in the soul of this swindler, and gives him a promise: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.” The promise that God originally gave to Abraham, and passed on to Isaac, the promise of the land and of many descendants is now extended to Jacob, in all his unworthiness, all his flawed humanity.

And when Jacob wakes up he is amazed and says, “Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” He names the place, “Bethel” meaning literally, “God’s house” and creates a shrine, an altar, to mark the sacredness of the place. Unexpectedly, Jacob finds that God is not only in the land of his mother’s people, his father’s ancestors, in the land God had promised to give them. No. He finds that the God of his ancestors is the God of any place he goes to, any place he finds himself.

Wherever you are is called Here. There is nothing special about the place Jacob stopped in. It was a place like any other. Yet it is the place where he first encounters God directly. It is a turning point in his life. It is the point where he finally stops running from the consequences of his actions, and makes a decision on his own. And that decision is the simplest, and the only decision, that he has to make: “The Holy One will be my God.”

Perhaps it is only in stopping and recognizing his own lost-ness, that Jacob can allow himself to be found. The poet David Whyte says, “The ability to be lost is striking. It makes you attentive.” The *ability* to be lost is striking. It makes you attentive. It is not just being lost that makes you attentive, not if the lost-ness makes you afraid, makes you confused, makes you frustrated. Not if being lost makes you spin around in circles trying to find the way out or the way in, the way back or the way forward, the way home or the way to go on.

It is the *ability* to be lost that is the key; that is even, I might say, an essential spiritual practice of living. The ability to stand still, to stop doing, to just breathe. To stay in the lost-ness, in the confusion, in the grief, in the anger, in the loneliness. To stay still for long enough, that God can come and find you. Ultimately, it is our willingness to become lost, to admit that that’s what’s happening, and our courage to listen attentively for the Spirit that leads to our being

found. Or, in other words, becoming lost is when real change begins, and, with the attention it brings, the way ahead becomes clear.

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Stand still. The forest knows Where you are. You must let it find you. We all have our moments of lost-ness. It's why the twenty-third psalm is so popular, with its promise that we will be followed, pursued and found by the Good Shepherd. Maybe it's even why the TV series, "Lost" was so popular! Because, if you ever watched the show, every time the characters found an answer to some big question that was haunting them about their circumstances, their reality, it in turn led only to new and bigger and more mysterious questions. About how they got there, and what they were doing there; about who they really were and what they were for; how they were going to get home, and what in the heck it all meant, anyway.

What is interesting in this story of being lost and found, of finding that *wherever you are is called Here*, is how often the word "place" is used. It's used repeatedly, to the point of awkward redundancy. Of course, I imagine, it is to emphasize that God is not bound or limited to our designated worship spaces: our churches or cathedrals, our temples or synagogues or mosques.

However I wonder if there's another reason. It so happens that in the time period after the Hebrew Scripture was written, the phrase "the place" was used as a name for God. Because Jews believe the name of God is too holy, mysterious and sacred to say out loud, they use a variety of phrases to avoid having to say the word "God," phrases like "the name", or "Adonai" which means "lord" or "master" in Hebrew.

But the phrase "the place" was a name for God, so that, as a Jewish commentary says, "'He came upon a certain place,' could be read, 'He came upon God.' Is God then a place? In a way, say the Rabbis, in that (God) encompasses the whole world."

[*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*]

Wherever you are is called Here, says the poem, *And you must treat it as a powerful stranger...* And sometimes, that stranger, the divine presence, the Spirit, the energy of the cosmos and creation and our very next breath, is strange to us, indeed. It's hard for us to find, and sometimes seems even eerily and emptily absent from us.

And yet...if we can allow ourselves to be truly lost, to feel completely alone, to stand completely still, it may be that we will be found by the powerful stranger who is, at one and the same time, the familiar and comforting friend, breathing assurance and promise and blessing.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers I have made this place around you, If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[for the idea of using the poem "Lost" by David Wagoner, credit is due to Rev. Patrick Blaney of St. Thomas' Anglican Church in Vancouver, BC; www.stthomasvancouver.ca]