

IT WAS ALL A DREAM

Stacy Penalva lives in Indianapolis where she and her family faithfully attend church services every Sunday morning. Then, most weeks, they are joined at their home by another church family for food and fellowship.

One day during the week Stacy had occasion to phone her friends. Their daughter, four-year old Alicia, answered the phone.

“Who’s calling?” asked little Alicia.

Stacy writes: “To tease her I said, ‘Alicia, you come to my house almost every Sunday and you don’t know who I am?’ [Alicia] replied breathlessly, ‘Jesus?’” (“Heart to Heart,” *Today’s Christian Woman*)

Alicia’s mistake is understandable. After all, it is not unusual for us to think of the church as God’s House. In fact, it’s actually rather biblical.

The Psalmist, referring to the Temple in Jerusalem, says, “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.” (Psalm 84:4) And Luke tells about the time the story of twelve-year old Jesus, got separated from his parents during Passover in Jerusalem. When they finally find him, he is in the Temple, talking with the rabbis. When they question his behavior, he says, “Did you not know I must be in my father’s house?” (2:49b) Yes God is often spoken of as being confined to a particular place. Take our story from Genesis.

Jacob is on a journey, and he falls asleep. He has a dream, a marvelous dream of angels climbing up and down ladders to heaven. And in the dream he hears God speaking, reassuring him that the promises God made to Jacob’s ancestors, will be kept. “Know that I am with you,” says the Lord, “and I will go with you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.” (28:15a)

When Jacob wakes up, he is so stirred by his dream, so energized by his vision that he wants to memorialize the place where it happened. So he erects a stone pillar to mark the very spot where he encountered God. And he calls the place, Beth-El, which means, “the house of God.”

Jacob, of course, is only one of literally thousands of people, who over the centuries have erected pillars and shrines, who have built temples and churches, to mark places where God has been encountered, where the Holy has been revealed. One thinks of places like Lourdes,

Guadalupe and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Time and time again, human beings, like Jacob, have labeled this place or that as especially holy, especially sacred. Time and again we have declared one place or another as God's special abode, as the House of God. Which is all well and good. We need such places, we need such reminders.

I had a parishioner in a former parish who lived up the street from the church. He was largely house-bound as he cared for his wife who had advanced Alzheimer's. He once told me that just seeing the steeple in the distance helped him remember God love.

Last month on the youth mission trip, as we stepped into Grace Cathedral in San Francisco with its wonderful labyrinth, I was struck by the palpable sense of God's presence. That place, that labyrinth, helped to center our kids, and helped center our whole experience. It was a tangible reminder of God's presence in our midst.

We do need churches and shrines. We do need altars, and steeples and labyrinths. WE do need places like Beth-El to remind us of God's presence in our midst. But we make a huge mistake if we think—even for a moment—that God is restricted to such places.

Take another look at the Jacob story. No doubt the authors of Genesis, writing centuries later, included it to help explain why one of the chief Israelite shrines was located in Beth-el. The story has an etiological purpose—that is it answers a question: why do we have a shrine at Beth-El? What makes that place so special? Well, say the authors, Jacob encountered God at Beth-El. And if Jacob had that experience there, so might you or I. As John Huffman once wrote: "If I go to a place God has met me before . . . I often find He meets me again."
(Leadership, XII:3)

But this place now called Beth-El started out as a common city called Luz. It was just a stopping point on Jacob's journey. It was no more than an ancient Motel 6. Not even that. It was just a rest area off the highway to Haran. It was nothing special, yet it was here, lying on the ground, with his head propped up by a rock for a pillow, that Jacob met God.

And there's more. Look again at what God actually tells Jacob in his dream: "Know that I am with you *and will keep you wherever you go . . . for I will not leave you . . .*" (Genesis 28:15a, emphasis mine)

Despite the angels, the ladder to heaven and the voice of God, the primary message of this passage is not, "this place is especially sacred, this place is where you can encounter God." No, the primary message is that all places are sacred, that God can be found anywhere we are willing to look! Even in a city called Luz. Even in a place called Westport.

One of my teachers, the late Jerry May, was an incredibly gifted psychiatrist and spiritual director. In his practice and through his books he helped countless folks discover God's presence in their lives. And his teaching helped many of us learn the art of guiding pilgrims on their spiritual journeys.

Jerry's last book, actually published posthumously, is all about his experience of the great outdoors, what he often called the Wilderness. For most of his life, Jerry found great solace in the woods. As he camped, and fished, he felt a very close connection to God.

In the early nineties he went through an especially difficult time in his life. He had become more and more tied to his office in metropolitan Washington and his work felt very routine. A few friendships come to an end. His mother died. He felt distant and disconnected. "Through it all," he writes, "I was feeling an increasingly passionate yearning . . . for God. . . . And somehow it connected with the wilderness." (*The Wisdom of Wilderness*, 10)

And so it was that he undertook a series of camping trips to the Green Ridge State Forest in western Maryland. And there he does indeed experience anew the presence of God. Much of the book describes those experiences. They are powerful stories. But then, life takes another turn, and near the end of the book, he recounts how, in time, he rediscovered he didn't need to go to the woods to find God.

You see, Jerry contracted cancer. And in the end he couldn't go camping. He couldn't go fishing. In fact he was at times, completely confined to home or hospital.

Writing in his last months, he says: "I am sick now. The prospect of death is continually before me. My body is frail, my energy always at the end of exhaustion. At the same time I am wilder than I've ever been before. My soul basks in wilderness, and I am grateful. . . . In truth [you see] Wilderness is everywhere. You don't have to go tromping in the mountains or desert as I did. You may find it in a local park, an open field or a small woods. You may even find it in your own room, or your own body and mind. All it takes is listening for Wisdom's call." (xix; 186) It was that knowledge that allowed Jerry to face death with a firm belief that he was indeed loved by the Creator of All.

Yes, there are churches and mountains, special places where you and I can and do experience God. But God can be experienced anywhere, all you need do is watch and listen. For the promise was not just for Jacob and Jerry—it is also for you. "Know that I am with you and I will go with you wherever you go" Wherever you go.

Amen

John H. Danner

