



Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 19, 2020

Prelude: O Lord I am not Worthy

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters the church leadership truly hopes that you are having a restful and joyful summer. We miss seeing and being with, but hope that we continue to take care of each other while apart. We are grateful that there has been minimal heartbreak and sorrow while we have been separated. When we come together, as we are planning for September, we will need to continue the practice of social distancing that has been recommended for all types of gatherings. As a church we are striving to be a good statistic of what can be achieved by working responsibly together. In our preparation to return we ask that you watch for a questionnaire that is being composed so that we can be prepared. When it arrives we ask that you complete and mail your responses to the church. Until then please remain steady and steadfast as we weather this storm.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

Friends, let us approach worship today with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
With our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed
with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
For he who has promised is faithful.

Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Let us encourage one another as we meet together today.

Let us praise the Lord! Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Thank Our God for Sisters, Brothers”

Roger Powell

Thank our God for sisters, brothers, one by grace, in harmony,
Joining heart to heart with others, making strong community.
With the cross of Christ our standard, let us sing as with one voice,
Glory, glory, yours the promise: we who are the church rejoice.

Praise to God for congregations, keeping faith with Christ as guide;
Many tongues of many nations, song and service unified.
Sweet the psalm and sweet the carol, when our song is raised as one.
Glory, glory, yours the glory, as in heaven your will be done.

Holy is your name forever! Heal divisions that remain;
Bless the church's new endeavors; make our witness one again.
One in Christ and in Christ's gospel, make us one we now implore.
Glory, glory, yours the glory, then and now and evermore.

A Time of Prayer:

Faithful God, always ready to welcome, always ready to hear, we come before you open to new faith. Disturb us, so that we shed the old and grow into new creations in Christ. Move us to deepen our discipleship as you reveal fresh challenges and call us into new identities. Strengthen us to share in Christ's suffering, that we might also know the power of his resurrection. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who claims us as his own. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Genesis 28: 10-19a (NIV)

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. 11He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' 16Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' 17And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Musical Interlude:

Choral- J.S. Bach

The Message: "Take the time to be still, to rest, to dream"

Everyone knows that diet and exercise are important to good health. Experts say that five daily servings of fruits and vegetables, along with 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise, are essential to personal fitness.

But so is sleep.

Miss a good night's sleep, and you run the risk of gaining weight, becoming depressed, and increasing your chances of heart disease and stroke. Besides, writes journalist Maddie Stone, you need sleep "in order not to feel like garbage the next day."

Sometimes the healthiest activity is no activity. Just stop working and go to bed!

Recently, a whole industry has grown up around the importance of getting a good night's sleep. Popular sleep-trackers such as Fitbit and the Oura Ring can give you insight into how well you sleep at night.

Of particular importance is REM sleep, in which you experience rapid eye movement. In this sleep stage, your heart rate and blood pressure increase. Your arm and leg muscles become temporarily paralyzed. And most interesting of all: Your brain activity becomes similar to what is seen in wakefulness. This is the stage in which you are most likely to dream.

According to Maddie Stone, "Research suggests that REM and deep sleep together play an important role in memory consolidation and stabilization."

Skimp on your sleep, and you are certainly going to feel like garbage the next day. But even worse, you are going to miss some valuable dream time, in which your brain does very important work.

Jacob was one of the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, and he was living a very stressful life. In particular, he was locked in a bitter sibling rivalry with his twin brother Esau. First, Jacob tricked his father in order to receive the blessing that was destined for his brother. Then, when Esau made plans to murder his sneaky brother, Jacob fled toward the city of Haran to escape Esau's fury.

If anyone deserved a sleepless night, it was Jacob.

But the book of Genesis tells us that Jacob came to a certain place on his journey toward Haran, "and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place" (28:11).

His heart rate and blood pressure increased.

His arm and leg muscles became temporarily paralyzed.

His brain activity became similar to wakefulness.

And he began to dream.

Now, Jacob was not wearing a Fitbit or Oura Ring. He was not using technology to track his sleep. But even without these devices, we can gain some very important guidance from the dream he experienced.

For us, Jacob is the Sleep-Tracker.

According to Genesis, Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth. Some translations say that it was a stairway or a ramp, but in any case, the top of it reached to heaven. The angels of God were "ascending and descending on it" (v. 12).

Weird dream? Absolutely. Almost as strange as the one experienced by the legendary man of Peru.

There once was a man from Peru,

Who dreamed he was eating his shoe.

He woke up at night,
With a terrible fright,
To find out that his dream had come true.

Jacob's dream was very different, fortunately. But as strange as it was, it carried a message.

Remember: The brain is working hard during deep sleep.

The Lord stood beside Jacob in the dream and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring" (v. 13). God promised that Jacob's offspring would be numerous, spreading to the four corners of the earth, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed in Jacob and in his offspring.

Then God concluded with the words, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (v. 15).

When we track Jacob's sleep, we move closer to God and make important discoveries about the nature of our Lord. Jacob's dream reveals to us that:

God wants a relationship with us. The ladder between heaven and earth is a clear sign that God is not content to rule the universe from some heavenly height, but wants to be connected to us. This desire for a relationship was seen first when Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" (Genesis 3:8). This longing for a close connection was seen most clearly when the word of God "became flesh and lived among us" as Jesus Christ (John 1:14).

Jacob's dream reveals that God wants to be with us, not distant from us. God enters into the very center of human life, in all of its complexities and difficulties.

God also comes to us in grace, not in judgment. If anyone deserved to be judged for his sins, it was Jacob. He took advantage of Esau when the older brother was weak with hunger, offering him bread and lentil stew in exchange for his birthright (Genesis 25:29-34). Then, Jacob disguised himself as Esau in order to receive their father's blessing (27:1-29). And yet, when the Lord appeared to Jacob, God offered him gracious gifts of land and numerous offspring.

Jacob's dream shows that God gives us what we need, not what we deserve. "The LORD is gracious and merciful," says Psalm 145, "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (v. 8).

God also promises to be with us wherever we go, and to remain faithful to us. The name Immanuel means "God is with us," a name first spoken by the prophet Isaiah (7:14) and later attached to Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:23). God never leaves us or abandons us, but stays close beside us, through all of our pains and struggles and failures. Although we sometimes fall away from God, the Lord never falls away from us. "I will not leave you," says God to Jacob, "until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15).

Jacob's dream assures us that God is by our side, perfectly faithful to us.

Fitbit and the Oura Ring may be very fine technologies, but they don't tell us nearly as much as Jacob the Sleep-Tracker. When we track Jacob's dream,

we discover that God wants a relationship with us, comes to us in grace, and promises to be with us forever.

Jacob invites us to respond to his dream by seeing and accepting that God is with us. Genesis tells us that when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!” (v. 16). He discovered in his dream that God was far closer than he ever imagined, and that the place of his sleeping was “the house of God” and the “gate of heaven” (v. 17). Then Jacob called the place “Bethel,” which means “House of God” (v. 19).

This story makes clear that the life of faith is not all about frantic activity. Jacob realized that the Lord was with him when he was sleeping, not when he was working. He discovered the house of God and the gate of heaven when he was sitting still, not running around. We, too, can move closer to God by caring for our bodies, by taking time to rest, and by getting enough sleep. We discover that the Lord is near when we stop our relentless activity and allow ourselves to rest and dream.

The summer is a good time to track our sleep and strengthen our relationship with God. Along with Jacob, we can discover the truth of Psalm 46:10:

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still, and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

God wants a relationship with you. God offers you grace, not judgment. God promises to be with you always, and to be faithful to you. These are the truths of Jacob’s dream, and they will be true for you if you take the time to be still and know that God is with you. As you slow down and accept this truth, let it sink in far enough that it will remain true through the busy months that lie ahead. Remember that part of the value of deep sleep is that it allows for “memory consolidation and stabilization.”

In these slower summer days, consolidate the memory of Jacob’s dream and your own experience of God’s presence and God’s grace. Stabilize these beliefs so that they will remain real and strong as you face the challenges of the days to come.

Take the time to be still, to rest, to dream. When you do, you’ll move closer to God, and you’ll find yourself in Bethel, the House of God.

Musical Interlude:

Prelude- J. B. Lully

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Hurd
Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Cathie Perra
Maria Piazza
Chris Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Church and all of its members and friends

All members of our armed forced who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty

Loving God, we come to you in gratitude for your love, which is always present to us. In the stillness of these moments, we remember with thanksgiving the times in our lives when your love has enabled us to rise to our better selves. We thank you for the gift of your Son, who came that we might know what perfect love looks like.

We remember, too, the times when we have acted in anger rather than in love; we recall with remorse when our patience has been less than perfect and our behavior has been childish and surly. Forgive us for the occasions when we have loved things and used people and when we have failed to make love a priority in our lives.

Breathe in us new life, instilling us with enthusiasm for the opportunities we have to begin again. Empowered by your love for us, O God, let us unite ourselves with all of life in the example of Jesus, the Lord of our lives. Help us to be intentional in the way we interact with one another, so that there can be no doubt as to whom we serve. These are our prayers as we are reminded of him who taught us to pray to you in saying.... “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Closing Hymn:

“God Be With You Till We Meet Again”

Jeremiah E. Rankin

God be with you till we meet again; By His counsels guide, uphold you,
With His sheep in love enfold you; God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again! 'Neath His wings protecting hide you,
Daily manna still provide you; God be with you till we meet again!

God be with you till we meet again! When life's perils thick confound you,
Put His arms unfailing round you; God be with you till we meet again!

God be with you till we meet again! Keep love's banner floating o'er you,
Smite death's threatening wave before you; God be with you till we meet again!

Benediction:

Friends, go into this week with God's word to Jacob — and to us — ringing in your ears: “I am the LORD. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you.” By the power of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, let us live into God's word of presence and power to us this week. Amen.

Postlude:

Hail, Thou Once Despised Jesus