

Where We Meet God

Genesis 28:10-17; Matthew 18:19-20

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 2) 2025

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Earlier this week at the Fellowship Southwest's Thriving Congregations Immigration Ministry Learning Conference, we were introduced to the art of J. Leigh Garcia. We were shown a slide of one of Garcia's paintings. It is of her when she was an infant being held by a baptismal font while a Lutheran pastor pours water over her head. Meanwhile, the baptismal font itself has what looks like grass in the forefront of the painting, while a small figure of a man is swimming across the font.

Garcia said she grew up listening to her grandfather tell stories of swimming across the Rio Grande to the United States. Listening to him she learned to see it as a kind of baptism – a swimming to a new life. Like baptism, Garcia says the Rio Grande cleanses immigrants of their past lives, rebirthing them into new opportunities.

Like her grandfather, thousands of immigrants swim across the Rio Grande, and upon arriving on the northern shore, they kneel in prayer, thanking God that they made it thus far and that God is giving them a new start, a new life. There on the shore God meets them in the water and in prayer. The Rio Grande has become a holy place for many immigrants. It is what Celtic Christianity calls a “thin place,” where the veil between heaven and earth becomes so thin that we experience heaven and earth as one.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, Jacob has a dream of a thin place. A ladder extends from heaven and earth with angels going up and down it. Jacob understands that heaven and earth are connected, and God tells Jacob that God will be with him and bring him back to this place. Jacob awakens and says, “Surely the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it.” He names the place Bethel, meaning the house of God, and realizes this very place is the gate to heaven.

Traditionally, these thin places and thin moments are what the church has called a “sacrament.” A sacrament is a meeting place or time where God and a person and the church meet. It is a thin place. It is a thin moment. There are many places where we meet God, and there are many sacramental moments, but at least two – baptism and Holy Communion – are where God has particularly promised to meet us.

Here at Austin Heights Church, it is not often that we celebrate both baptism and Holy Communion on the same morning, but this morning with the baptism of Alex Bryant, we get to do so. Today is one of those thin moments, a sacramental time and place, where we are drawn close to God. So, we pause and listen. We ask God to root us in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of the Living Christ. We pray, “Come, Holy Spirit,” and recenter our lives. We renew our own baptism as we have witnessed the baptism of Alex but also when we come to receive the body and blood of Christ, remembering who we are, whose we are, and whom we hope to become.

Will Willimon remembers when he was a Yale Divinity School student, and a bunch of divinity students went down south to participate in some of the marches and protests of the Civil Rights Movement. He said they spent the entire day inside a hot church building singing spirituals and freedom songs, listening to preachers

pray long prayers and preach long sermons. Will said they wanted to get out there and march! They wanted to protest! They wanted to confront the segregationists! And they all grew agitated and restless with the endless singing and praying and preaching. Finally, someone spoke up, “Let’s go! Let’s get out there!”

An old preacher, a veteran pastor who had been to hell and back over the years, over the decades of facing segregation and racism and discrimination said, “It is going to take more than good intentions when you go out there to face police dogs, water hoses, and brutality. We’re going to sing and pray and preach some more.”

That is in microcosm much of what we seek to do at Austin Heights. Good intentions are not enough. We root our lives in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ so we will have the spiritual strength to stand against hatred, violence, fear, and ruthless power, and so we will serve and love and show mercy to the least of these our sisters and brothers.

But that’s not all. We participate in these sacraments so that when we do confront the darkness out there, we will make sure that we do so as members of the Body of Christ, who live and act like Jesus. Renewing our baptismal vows, eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus, and hearing the Word of God, shapes and reshapes who we are. Otherwise, the darkness out there gets inside of us, and we become no different than what we oppose.

Like Jacob, let us say, surely the Lord is in this place. Unlike Jacob, we know it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.