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The Community Church of Sebastopol

July 19, 2020

Text: Genesis 28:10-19

Worship Theme: Stewardship of Technology

Title: What I Want With You, Beloveds, Is a Church That _____.

I don't know about you but I found myself surprised this week when I realized that we are already more than halfway through the month of July. After four months of sheltering-in-place, it can be challenging to grasp the passage of time when the rhythms we were once accustomed to are upended with no end in sight. I've seen unmasked neighborhood and park gatherings increase significantly in the past few weeks, despite the number of COVID cases being higher in California than ever before. The fatigue of this reality we are living in seems to be rising. I can feel it in myself too, the exhausting heartbreak of not knowing when I will be able to hug my chosen family again. No matter how many Zoom meetings and parties I go to, technology cannot seem to fill that bodily, relational need. This is a deep, collective grief we find ourselves in. It's a grief that rises up every time we say, "When are we going to have church again?" or "How long until we will get to open the church again?" And yet, what if it is exactly in this moment, in this place, in these ways that we are being church? What if God really is in *this* place? What if technology is the unexpected, holy ground we now find ourselves on, surrounded by the ever-present love of God?

As I read the scripture from Genesis for this week, I found myself wondering if Jacob expected to encounter God in his wilderness? He was, after all, fleeing to the wilderness alone because back home, his life was being threatened. While he had heard promises of good things to come, the when and how of it all, I imagine, seemed quite far off at this moment, as he lay tired and vulnerable, his head resting on a rock in the middle of the desert. And yet, it is in this unexpected moment, in this time and place he could not have imagined before, between all that he once knew and every uncertainty and promise that lay ahead of him, that he had a dream. And in this dream, he encounters God. A God who says, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..."

Know that I am with you as you wander through the wilderness.

Know that I am with you as you as you grieve the loss of all you have known.

Know that I am with you as you wish things could go back to normal.

Know that I am with you when uncertainty makes you weary.

Know that I am with you as you dream a new day into life.

Through this dreaming, Jacob encounters his wilderness moment in an entirely new way. "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" Changed by this vision, Jacob took the rock he had been laying on and made an altar to God. This rock that had once only been understood as a means to an end, a tool to help him with a particular task, now became a sacred sign of God's presence. Like Jacob, how is COVID inviting us to be transformed into dreamers and this technology, once a tool to complete a task, now an anointed dwelling of the Holy One? How are we being invited to testify, surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!?

Families and friends who could not see each other regularly are now gathering for weekly virtual meals. *Surely the Lord is in this place.*

Artists that many of us could never afford to see perform are now hosting free online concerts. *Surely the Lord is in this place.*

Museums that were once inaccessible to folks with disabilities are now offering virtual tours. Artists, activists, organizers, preachers, and teachers are holding regular online webinars and discussions, widening conversations of imagination beyond any kind of gathering that could happen in person. *Surely the Lord is in this place.*

Members of our church who have not been able to attend public worship in years are now able to worship every Sunday. Some have even volunteered to help lead worship. *Surely the Lord is in this place.*

There are more virtual weekly prayer gatherings and discussion groups emerging across our congregation now than when we met in person. *Surely the Lord is in this place.*

So I find myself asking, how is this Covid-19 wilderness inviting us to experience God's presence in new ways? How can we continue to steward this technology, to dream this technology into an altar that testifies, surely the Lord is in this place?

When Sharon and I first started dating, we wrote each other a series of poems that we now call our, "House Poems." Each poem repeated the lines, "a house of _____ is what I want with you," or "What I want with you is a house that _____," and then the poem would continue to cast visions for the life we wanted to build together.

"A house on a hill
is what I want with you
so that we are always climbing home
like pilgrims who make our way by walking
like ants
who carry their dead with them
and follow each other into life"

"A house that knows how to let in the
water and weather
is what I want with you."

These poems were our way of dreaming together, of giving language and voice to the presence of all that was holy and hoped for in our unfolding life together. So church, in the spirit of this dreaming aloud. In the spirit of wandering together in the wilderness where the very stuff of dreams are made and God is manifest, I invite us to write our "Church Poems" together. If in the time of COVID, technology is our holy ground, the place where we can now come to meet one another and in doing so encounter the presence of God time and time again, then what dreams of church do we want to share with one another?

I'm going to get us going and then I invite you to write your "Church Poems" beginning with the line, "What I want with you, Beloveds, is a church that _____" I hope you will share your reflections in the comments or come share them at Zoom Fellowship Time. Let us dream together and be the church.

What I want with you, Beloveds, is a church
without doors because we are everywhere,
a church on every street
in every home, is what I want with you
a church whose sanctuary walls are cellular walls,
the stuff of skin-stories and
breath-work, is what I want with you

What I want with you, Beloveds, is a church whose budget
proclaims the Lord's Prayer, "your kin-dom come, on
earth as it is in heaven"
The dreams we never dare to share because
they are not "normal church" is what I want with you

A church that holds the ordinary, dailyness of our
lives as sacred text is what I want with you, the
cats jumping on communion tables, the
dirty laundry in the corner, where our children
and families shape the texture of our meetings
and how work can adapt to our bodies needs is what
I want with you

What I want with you, Beloveds, is an uncomfortable church,
a grieving church, a church turning to and becoming prayer,
a body-of-Christ church – no member separate from another
is what I want with you, church

Is is in this unexpected, wilderness moment, in this time and place Jacob could not have
imagined before, between all that he once knew and every uncertainty and promise that lay ahead
of him, that he had a dream. And in this dream, he encounters God. A God who says, "Know that
I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..." Through this dreaming, Jacob encounters
his wilderness moment in an entirely new way. What dreaming is rising up in us church, until
like Jacob, we can turn this technology into an altar and declare, "Surely the Lord is in this
place—and I did not know it!"