

## Jacob's Pillow

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the <sup>18<sup>th</sup></sup> ~~sixteenth~~ Sunday in Ordinary Time, <sup>July 21</sup>, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm ~~139:1-12, 23-24~~; Romans ~~8:12-25~~; Matthew ~~13:24-30, 36-43~~. <sup>John 1:43-50</sup> <sup>17:1-7, 15</sup>; <sup>1 Peter 2:4-7</sup>;

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Unless I was dreaming, I read in the newspaper recently that Prime Minister John Major of Great Britain announced that he's returning the Stone of Scone to Scotland. The Stone of Scone, also called the Stone of Destiny, is a block of red sandstone. I estimate its size to be about two feet square and about four inches thick. It must weigh a couple hundred pounds.

The Stone of Scone has a fascinating story surrounding it. Ancient Scottish legend claims that it's the stone that Jacob used as a pillow some 3,500 years ago. According to the legend, years after Jacob used it as a pillow, someone took the stone from Bethel to Spain, perhaps as a sacred relic of time Jacob used it. It became the judgment seat of a man named Gathelus who lived in the days of Moses. Gathelus married a daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh. His daughter's name was Scota. According to the legend, the Spanish magistrate and the Egyptian princess were the ancestor of the Scots. The Scots eventually settled in Ireland before coming to Scotland. They brought Jacob's Pillow with them to Ireland. In the ninth century, a Scottish king brought the stone with him from Ireland to Scotland where he reigned from the town of Scone.

Every Scottish king was crowned on the Stone of Scone, or, Jacob's pillow, until 1293. In 1296 King Edward I of England attempted to subdue the rough and unruly Scots. He invaded Scotland, seized the Stone of Scone, the Scottish symbol of royal

authority, and declared himself king of Scotland. The stubborn Scots refused to acknowledge his sovereignty. Nevertheless, he took the Stone back to England, had a coronation chair designed especially for it, and placed it in Westminster Abbey where every English monarch has been crowned since that time.

According to an ancient Scottish prophecy wherever the Stone of Scone, or Jacob's Pillow, goes, the monarchy of Scotland follows. In fulfilment of that prophecy, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England in 1603. The royal Scottish House of Stuart ruled England, intermittantly, until the death of Queen Anne in 1714. So, with the Stone of Scone returning to Scotland, what does this augur for the British Monarchy and Scotland's royal house of Stuart? Isn't it amazing how a stone, an ancient stone, can be surrounded with so much history and legend and mystery?

Our Old Testament lesson says that "Jacob 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. And 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. And the Lord stood beside him..." And the Lord said, 'I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!.... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' 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. He called that place Bethel." Now, Bethel means in Hebrew, House of God. Jacob's pillow reminded travelers that God was in that place, that very ordinary place, in a very special way. Jacob's Pillow, an ordinary stone, became a sign of God's invisible presence.

Stones play such an important part in the Biblical story and yet we rarely notice stones. But God can use stones as signs of his presence. For example, God inscribed the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stones. The stone tablets became signs of God's presence. After Joshua led the Children of Israel across the Jordan River on dry land he heaped up stones as a visible sign of God's presence. Remember again how the boy David killed Goliath with a small stone flung from his sling-shot. That little stone reminds us of God's presence with David. Remember also how they rolled a huge stone over the tomb of Jesus after he was crucified, dead, and buried. But sometime on the first Easter morning the stone was rolled away and Jesus rose from the grave. The stone that once covered his tomb bears mute witness to the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of our own resurrection to eternal life. And St. Peter says that Jesus is a living stone who also makes us living stones which God uses to build a spiritual temple to bear witness to his presence in the world.

If only stones could talk. I'd love to carry on a conversation with the stone that God rolled away from the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning. I'd love to talk to the

stone that David used to kill Goliath. And I'd love to ask the Stone of Scone, "Are you really Jacob's pillow?"

In her book, "Teaching a Stone to Talk", Annie Dillard claims she has a friend named Larry who found a "palm-sized oval beach cobble (stone)." He keeps it on a shelf. But everyday Larry takes it off the shelf, puts it on a table, and tries to teach it to talk. Now, Larry's not crazy! He has no hopes, whatsoever, of having a conversation with the stone. He's far less ambitious and foolish than that. He's simply trying to teach it to say just a single word. Just one little word like "cup" or "uncle". So far his efforts have produced no success. The stone remains silent. But in his will he's leaving the stone to his infant son whom he hopes will continue patiently to try to teach the stone to talk.

But some stones do talk. Jacob's pillow speaks. Jacob's Pillow speaks to us of God's presence. Jacob set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He set it up to bear witness to the presence of the God of Glory who has come down from heaven to earth. Jacob's pillow, an ordinary stone, speaks of Jesus Christ. Stones can speak.

And this church building is a pile of stones; a pile of bricks and mortar. And like Jacob's pillow, this building has been erected and will be dedicated to the glory of God. We built it to mark the place where God has revealed himself to us and our spiritual ancestors for 250 years. This building it meant to speak of Jesus Christ. It's steeple points to him who is the ladder between heaven and earth.

God has come down to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ has sanctified this world with God's presence. This world has become the House of God. God is in this place. God is in our universe. God is in our world. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is in this town - in this building. This pile of stones, these bricks and mortar, marks the place where God has met with men and women and children for 250 years.

But not everybody knows that God has made himself known to us through Jesus Christ. Hundreds of people in Oxford don't realize. They eat and drink, and sleep and go to work, make love, raise families, go to baseball games and soccer games, go on vacation, grow old and die and never recognize that God is in this place--this place. Perhaps even some of us here don't realize this, don't sense God's presence. God is in this place and we don't know it.

Jacob set up the stone he used for a pillow to mark the spot where he became aware of God's invisible presence. And the job of the church--both the people and this building--is to bear witness to God's invisible presence in this place.

Why did we build this church? We built it to point people to Christ. We built it because we want people to know that God is in this place. This pile of bricks and mortar, like Jacob's Pillow, is raised to bear witness to the presence of the One who has come down from heaven to us.

People sometimes fall asleep in church. People often sleep through the sermon. That's all right. Jacob slept in the house

of God. We can too. If you fall asleep while I'm preaching you may hear a far better sermon than you'll ever hear from me. You may hear the Lord of Heaven say to you, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.... I will not leave you." And when you awake you will know that the LORD is in this place. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in our wandering we sometimes fear leaving you behind, and being left all alone. In emptiness we sometimes look forward without hope, and think that life has lost its meaning. But always you are here: here is the house of God, and here is the gate of heaven.