

[PRAYER] So here we are again, in this place, a place that has helped generations of people to grow and endure in Christian faith. This building has been here for almost 150 years, in a city that grew up around it as it began to thrive. For some of you, I would imagine that every board, every crack and creak, every part of this place is extremely familiar to you and your family. And the community around us, with its people, its houses, businesses and schools, its roads and paths, its lakes and rivers, they all seem like second nature to you, probably. Of course, much of this place is new to me, and so I suppose that one thing that I bring to you is a new perspective on things that are old and familiar to you.

As soon as I was told that I was your new Pastor, I began to explore this place, and to circle it in prayer. By circling in prayer, I mean that I did what some of us did on my first Sunday here earlier this month. We walked down Main Street, up Camp Street, down Cutlery Avenue, and then back to Main Street on Rice Street, praying for people and places along the way. I hope and pray that those of you, who came on our prayer walk, began to look at God's possibilities in this place from a different perspective. Prayer isn't just something that we do in a church or in our homes. Prayer is a powerful and effective tool to bring God's story to life everywhere that we go, with everyone who we meet. Prayer is inviting God's story to come to life here, now, whenever it is needed.

I did six prayer circles around our church over the course of several weeks, before I started work here, taking different paths. Like Joshua circling the city of Jericho with the Israelites, I wanted to look at a new challenge from God's perspective, to see what God's story looked like in this place. And then, on July 1st, like Joshua, I did seven prayer circles around our church, taking different streets every time, and, like Joshua and the Israelites, I shouted in front of the church when I finished! I hope and pray that we'll find the time together to do even more prayer circles together, because they can really help us to look at the possibilities of this church from a new perspective.

You see, you know this place really well, in one sense, but in another sense, you may not know it hardly at all. Like many tried and true things in our lives, we're so used to looking at people and places from our same old perspectives, that we might

not notice the power and the strength of possibilities that exist in them, that we wrote off long ago as just part of the furnishings of our life. But there is not a part of all of God's creation that God has written off. There is not one part of God's creation that God is not ready to transform into a new part of God's story. There is not one life, one place, one possibility, that God is not ready to turn into something new, for the sake of what endures forever - God's everlasting love.

Even Jacob, the focus of today's reading from Genesis, was able to see things differently because of God's willingness to help us to see where we are differently. I say "Even," because, let's face it, Jacob's story is not a cut and dried case of a righteous person doing what God wants. Jacob was a bit of a trickster, deceiving his brother Esau out of his birthright, when Esau hungered for a bowl of stew, and even deceiving his old and blind father Isaac to get Isaac's blessing as his heir, even though it belonged rightfully to Esau. But Isaac understood that Jacob hungered to have that birthright. Isaac understood that Jacob hungered to have the blessings that God had promised to Abraham's descendants. And so, Isaac asked Jacob to follow in his footsteps, and to go claim a wife from the family of Rebekah, Jacob's mother, in Haran, so that Jacob's claims on God's promises would remain true and pure.

Now, let's remember that going from Jacob's home in Beer-sheba to Haran was not like going up to the corner to get a quart of milk! This was a long, long journey - about 450 miles, from southernmost Palestine into the heart of what is today Turkey. This was a commitment from Jacob not only to get a wife from the right family, but to get on the right path to the promises that God made to his family.

Way down the road from Beer-sheba, Jacob has to settle in for a night's rest in the middle of nowhere. There are no places to stay in, not even the shelter of some trees, or some leaves to pile up underneath him. The soil is rocky, and hard. He has hundreds of miles yet to go. To Jacob, it seemed that the place is forgettable, and forgotten. And yet this is the place that God had chosen to give a vision to Jacob, a vision of angels ascending and descending into heaven. Jacob hears the living God speak to him and affirm God's promises to Jacob and his family. Jacob awakes from his vision, and says, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

A certain place, where we were just passing through. Perhaps a place that we have seen many times, to the point that we don't notice it at all. And yet, like Jacob, when we make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of our God, our willingness to go on God's journey changes how we experience the places that we pass through. We are not yet fully transformed by God in this journey, when God's vision comes to us; we're still a work in progress. God's vision is God's invitation to see our entire life and every place that we go in our lives as part of God's story, a story written in faith, faith that transforms us and the possibilities of everything and everyone around us.

When we come to church, it's easy to listen to a story like Jacob's, and think, "Oh, this doesn't have much to do with me. That was long ago, in a place far away. Stories about Jesus and the Israelites in places like the Sea of Galilee, and the river Jordan, those are ancient, they have nothing to do with where I live, and how I live. They're just that - stories." But you see, faith changes how we see where we are, and how we're a part of it. Faith turns our view of things on its side...until we finally see that God's story has defined the very essence of our story all along. To you, it may be just Hanover Pond. Through faith, it's the sea of Galilee. To you, it may be just the Quinnipiac River. Through faith, it's the river Jordan. To you, maybe it's just a community known as South Meriden. Through faith, it's God's promised land, filled with God's people, waiting to experience the hope and promise of the living God. To you, this may be just a church building, where you think that you know every nook and cranny. But through faith, this is an awesome place, the house of the living God, the gateway to heaven on earth, a place filled with God's surprises!

And to you, it may be just your everyday life, doing everyday things, putting one front of the other on a long journey, with promises that seem far away from being fulfilled. You may put your head down on the hard rock of your problems, your sorrows, your aches, your pains, your losses, and think that this is the best that you can expect from life. But through faith, there is a stairway to heaven that God is ready to open in our hearts, so that we may, as Paul suggests today in his letter to the Romans, cry out to the God of creation, the God of salvation, the God of transformation, intimately, and passionately, as true children of God, "Abba! Father!"

Surely the LORD is in our lives and in our world, and we did not know it!

You see, our lives are not futile. The world that we live in has merit and worth beyond measure. It is faith that makes these things truly so. And it is through faith that we must view all of our joys, our sorrows, our challenges, and our opportunities. You are here. But through faith, what is here is not what you might think is here. You are here, but you are here as a part of a story that God has been building through the generations of believers who have chosen to take that journey of faith towards God's promises, a journey that started with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all of the women and men of Israel, that led us to God's ultimate story, the story of Jesus, the Christ, who has changed all stories for all time, forever, a story that is more relevant to our world than ever before, and more like our world than ever before..

And in God's Holy Spirit, we are being invited as God's church, in this, God's land, to be God's people, for the sake of God's kingdom and God's creation. Our prayer walk together was a small step towards helping us to see our lives, and the lives around us, in this way of faith. We will do more prayer walks. And, I pray, we will do more as God's people to see this world and our lives as God sees it, together. You are here. But not just here. This is now. But not just now. This is your church. But not just your church. God invites us to build the life of this church into the house of the living God, to open the gates of heaven in our very hearts, and in the hearts of everyone around us, a magnificent journey into hope. How awesome is this place! How awesome, indeed! Amen.