



HEAVEN'S GATE

July 23, 2017, The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 28:10-19a

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Lord, we are thankful for thin spaces. For those times in our lives you become tangible to us, reminding us that you are right here with us and that you keep us no matter where we go. Be with us now as we remove our sandals and approach you as if this is Holy ground, as if this is heaven's gate. In your great Son's name we pray, amen.

Last month, Peter Manning, Blake Myers, Consuelo Williams, a whole bunch of Brick Church high schoolers, and I, left the city in two twelve passenger vans and went toward West Virginia. We left early on a Sunday morning and arrived in Pinch, WV, at a place called Heritage Baptist Church in the early evening. It is there that we would lay our heads for the duration of the week.

We didn't go there to rest but rather to work, to work hard, in order to help a little town called Clendenin begin to rebuild. You see, last summer, the week after we returned home from being on a mission trip to Rosedale, WV, huge storms ravaged the state. At least twelve counties were affected and 28 lives were claimed. Clendenin had over 14 feet of water rush through the town, causing extensive flood damage. Schools were in ruins, the EMT and firehouses were lost, many homes became uninhabitable and the town was utterly destroyed.

And that is where the Lord Our God called us. That is where we were able to ascend and descend on ladders to help Clendenin rebuild. Not in a dream but in reality. It is a trip that many of us knew, like in today's text that Debbie just read



for us says, “that God was with us, and that God would keep us wherever we went, and that God would be with us and with the town of Clendenin.”

Notice I said “many of us,” because we did have a few youth who were with us who doubt the existence of God. They, just like many of us gathered here today, are people who struggle to believe yet are here searching for God through the questions they ask and the debates they choose to get into about others’ belief in God.

God was with them and softened their hearts. To the point that one of them, the one who expressed the most doubt, told me on the third day how much “cooler” the trip was than expected. By the last day this individual was more agnostic than atheist. The Spirit certainly was at work in their hearts that week, and still is.

Our task for the week was to pull out and de-mold the floorboards, walls and ceilings of the first floor of a house that will be converted into a kayak rental shop. It will be a non-profit that is designed to bring in tourism and other consumers, which in turn will help the entire town. Another group on our mission trip worked on rebuilding a little league field and still another group worked on a food pantry and clothing exchange. The reason for these particular projects is that anything that used to draw people into, and through, the town of Clendenin has been lost.

There is no longer any real reason for people to cross the bridge and head into town. The schools that brought families in no longer exist and will never be rebuilt. That has eliminated the coming and going of hundreds of families who used to drive in and out of town every day. So who will shop at the local drug store, the tiny general store, the two restaurants, the Dollar General, or anything else that may have once been there? Why would anyone choose to rebuild a house if there is not town or community to be a part of?

So we put on our respirator masks, our goggles, our hard hats, and our work gloves and we went to work pulling out hundreds of boards and thousands of nails so the house could be treated for mold and salvaged. So that it could have new life, new



purpose, all because God is working through folks in Clendenin to rebuild, to regain community, to have new dreams, to have new life, meaning and purpose.

And as God told Jacob, so God told us, that He would not leave us until He has done what He has promised us and so He hasn't left us. He is right here with us and was there with us the whole time. Whether we hear Him or not, see Him or not, He is here and never leaves us. Constantly guiding, patiently waiting, whispering, screaming, nudging, and drawing us near. During that week we had many opportunities to see and experience God at work. Some tangible and some intangible.

And so I will share with you several of the times we felt God's presence with us throughout the week. To share with you how we saw God in creation, in the thunder and lighting, and in the whispers of a cool breeze. How when each of us needed God, God made His presence known to us just like he did to Jacob, our ancestor, so many years ago.

One morning while we were doing our morning devotions, around 8:00 AM every day when we took a ten-minute break to read and reflect on scripture. On the second morning in Pinch, WV, during those morning devotionals, we were sitting outside on the hillside reading about the power of God, and how when we find ourselves facing trials in our lives, that God is our source of strength in the midst of them. And that God is larger and more powerful than any obstacle set before us. It was then a thunderstorm announced its presence in the distant mountains.

The rolling thunder, darkening clouds, and flashes of light seemed to be a reminder from God to many of us that what we were reading and reflecting on about God's power was true. That God is bigger than any hurdle we may face in our lives. That God is mightier and that God is with us. That we need to look to Him as our ultimate source of strength in any storms that we face in our lives.

Another time when we, the leaders of the trip, felt the Spirit of God move among us was when each of our kids was included by the group in any activity we did.



Kids who may be labeled “cool” included those who would not be. Physically stronger and more active kids helped and included those more physically challenged. People who were slow to speak were patiently listened to without interruption. It was all so amazing to witness and yet so hard for any of us to paint for you the incredible picture of God’s kingdom that it was.

God’s presence was also felt toward the end of the week when another group from Wisconsin had been working on a hot tarmac all day and needed a break. They were working on a tarred black, long, flat roof, where there was no respite from the heat or the sun, and when they didn’t think they could go on anymore, and they needed a renewal of energy to push through, God showed up in what they believe was a deliberate breeze. The perfect refreshing gust that brought new life into the entire group.

There was another afternoon on the worksite when I needed a sign from God. A little encouragement or nudge. And amazingly enough a butterfly fluttered into my path after a brief rainstorm.

Then, on the evening of our last workday, many of us decided to jump in the river that nestles up to the Kayak shop we had been working on. So before heading back to the church where we could clean up for dinner and get ready for the evening’s events, we decided to get changed and take the plunge.

However, just moments after many of us had jumped in the river a rainstorm came through. Our fun had ended abruptly and we decided we needed to get out of the river in order for those who weren’t swimming to stay dry. But then as soon as we had all dried off one of the kids came from around the vans dressed and ready to take a swim in the river. It had taken him a bit more time to get ready for swimming but here he was ready, understandably downtrodden by the idea that he had missed the swim, that he had worked hard to get ready for it and that he had then missed his opportunity.



Then, in that moment, without hesitation, everyone who had been swimming and was already dried off, looked around at each other, put down their towels, said “let’s do this!” and “come on, buddy!” and sprinted back into the water hooting and hollering and including the young man who nearly missed the adventure. They purposefully and intentionally included him, into the fun of it all, making it all just so much better, more meaningful, and kingdom-like.

Then, no more than 30 minutes later, on the way home from working and getting a chance to cool off in the river, one of our vans saw a Jeep broken down on the side of the road. Instead of going by, they chose to stop and help. They were able to all get out and push the Jeep far enough and fast enough that it started and was able to drive where it could get fixed.

On our last full day there – a day some groups go whitewater rafting or to a water park – we decided to go see Lynn, the owner of the house we had worked on last year.

Our kids listened to her, encouraged her, hugged her, loved on her, and she loved on all of us. A person who could be equated to a modern day leper was loved on that day. A day they could’ve been whitewater rafting, or swimming at a water park, they chose the alternative route. A route or path that said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Another time we felt the presence of God on our journey was when we needed to come up with what we would give to each of our students to take home with them. A memento, marker, something to remember the trip by, in the same way that Jacob, in today’s text, took a stone and set it up as a pillar and called the place Bethel, which means House of God. And Blake Myers thought of the perfect gift. Blake thoughtfully turned some of the nails we had pulled out of the house into rings. And ritualistically affirming one another we each gave one to another to be reminded of God and our trip together. We then, a capella, sang a song we often



sing during our Sunday night youth worship services here at the church. It is called Sanctuary and the singing of it together it brought chills to our souls.

One of our leaders said, “Our group last week was like the apostles or something; a small band of Christians loving on each other and living in the Spirit. We truly were what a Christian community is supposed to be in microcosm. I am still so shaken and stirred by it all. The nail is always in my pocket.”

And finally, one of the youth who went on the trip emailed the following note to me. In it he said, “I walked in the park a few days after the trip, trying to reach God. At the end of the walk there was a double rainbow and on the other side there was an awesome sunset, telling me that I cannot escape God’s love.”

Each of us had so many encounters with God that trip that I wish we could put all of them in writing to share with members at the Brick Church.

Perhaps this is a call for each of us to leave Beer-sheba as Jacob once had and to head toward Haran. To all do something different, something radical to stir our lives to focus on God again and to “know that He is with you and that He will keep you forever.” To be reminded that “Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!” To be reminded, “How awesome this place is!” And that this is none other than the “house of God, and that this is indeed the gate of heaven.”

We laid our heads down there in West Virginia. Though we went to give something of ourselves, we each received more than we could have ever imagined. We went and we walked on Holy ground in Clendenin, WV. And just as God had promised, we returned blessed, knowing that God is with us, that He knows when we sit down and when we rise up. He discerns our thoughts from afar. He searches our path and our lying down, and is acquainted with all of our ways. God hems us in, behind and before, and lays His hand upon us. Where can we go from Your Spirit, Lord? Or where can we flee from your presence? If we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead us, and Your right hand shall hold us fast.



Just as Jacob knew God was beside him, and he set up a pillar, so we were reminded God is with us. And just as Jacob saw angels ascending and descending, we saw some too.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.