



THE GRACE OF SPACE: JACOB'S LADDER

Reflections on Jacob's Ladder, and his later struggle with the angel.

(Genesis 28:12 ... & Genesis 32:24-30)

Hymn "View the Starry Realm" (*words by N. Capek*)

First Reading: Knoxville, Tennessee, 27 July 2008

Imagine a man walking into the back of this gathering, opening up his guitar case, taking out a shotgun and aiming it at the congregation. Would you jump up and face the blast of the gun as Greg McKendry did? Greg McKendry and his wife had recently adopted a stepson. The stepson said in tears, "My Dad's a hero." Two dead, seven wounded. A history professor and several others subdued the killer. Police and Ambulances were called. When the police searched the home of the killer, Jim Adkisson, they discovered his anger against gays and liberals.

It was an anger fuelled by "right wing" radio shows. From Columbine to Knoxville, such killings are common in America today. One writer noted, "*My anger is concentrated on those people who stir up bigotry and discontent,*" the talk show hosts like "*Bill Reilly and Rush Limbaugh who have made ... careers out of liberal-bashing. ... And in the wake of my anger is pride. Despite my sadness .. I have never before been so proud to be a Unitarian, as well as a liberal.*"

The service that ended with a shotgun and death was to be a children's performance of the musical. ANNIE. At the end of the memorial service a few days later, the children led the congregation in singing the ANNIE theme song, "Tomorrow."

The sun'll come out
Tomorrow
Bet your bottom dollar
That tomorrow
There'll be sun!
Just thinking about
Tomorrow
Clears away the cobwebs.

And the sorrow
'Til there's none.

When I'm stuck a day
That's gray
and lonely,
I just stick out my chin
And Grin,
And Say,
Oh!

The sun'll come out
Tomorrow
So ya gotta hang on
'Til tomorrow
Come what may

("Annie" by Charles Strouse and Martin Charmin)

Silence (Meditation and/or hymn)

Homily: The Elections in America remind us that 2008 is also the 40th Anniversary of 1968. 1968, the year in which Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered at Memphis; the year in which Bobby Kennedy was murdered in Los Angeles; the year in which I joined thousands in Chicago trying to stop the War in Vietnam.

On 27 July, the same Sunday that two people were murdered in a Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, Dutch Minister, the Rev. Tina Geels, preached on the MAKOM, the Place, at All Souls Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

"The MAKOM is the place where you can be home. ...

What if there is no MAKOM, no place to be?"

She went on to say that when we have a real MAKOM, the safer we are, the more we have a responsibility to help others to create a Makom: *"Create a home for those who are in trouble."*

"With daily spiritual practice, create a home for the spirit within."

In the days that followed, I thought on her message: The struggle to be an open and welcoming church, to be a MAKOM for all people, for "All Souls." Like the Knoxville Church, in the 1980s, ministers in the Remonstrant Church started performing services of blessing

for homosexual couples. And the church paid the price of being shunned by some in the community.

The word **Makom** reminded me of Sam Oni . Sam was a member of our UU Church in Berkeley, California. Baptist Missionaries had sent him from Nigeria to Mercer University in MACON, Georgia. Sam was invited to come in his African costume to local Baptist Churches. Then one Sunday he came properly dressed in a suit to worship. Ushers would not let him in. MACON CHURCHES were not a **MAKOM** for Sam. Sam became a Unitarian.

To keep our head when all about us may be losing theirs, requires not just faith, but openness that can respond to grace, when it comes. We do not just "create" a **MAKOM**. It comes when the "I" in us connects with the "THOU," the "YOU" of the Holy.

*"And Jacob ... lighted upon a certain place, A MAKOM ...
And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth,
And the top of it reached to heaven:
And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.
And Jacob ... said : 'Surely the Lord is in this place ... This is none other
than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.' "*

From this dream comes the song,

*"We are climbing Jacob's ladder.
We are climbing Jacob's ladder "*

But in the text, the angels are going up and DOWN.
The MAKOM is a two-way ladder. Heaven comes to earth.

Silence

SERMON: THE GRACE OF SPACE - JACOB'S LADDER

*"O loving spirit, hope of earth,
Give us this day a small rebirth:
Grant grace that we may live with thee
In Oneness from all fear set free."*

I thank your pastor, and I thank this congregation for welcoming me.
To me, 8 Karlova is place of Awe, what the Hebrews call a "**Makom**."
To the wandering Jew, Amsterdam, Warsaw & Prague were "**Makom**":

a spiritual home. In ancient Hebrew, "**Makom**" originally meant "**place**." But it has come to mean a **special place** ... A place where you encounter "**the Holy**," whether you call the Holy, "God," "Allah" or "Nature." In an English poem titled, *The House of Christmas*, we read,

*To an open house in the evening,
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.*

The same poet wrote, "*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.*" (G. H. Chesterton).

The Christian Ideal has been found difficult and left untried. The same could be said of all religions: For most, religion is like music left on a page, and never played. My thoughts to day concern MAKOM, the place, the ground, the struggle for real religion.

In Genesis 28 starting with verse 10 we read,
*"and Jacob went out from Beersheba ... and at a certain place,
he tarried all night ... and he dreamed, and behold a ladder was
set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to Heaven,
and behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it."*

God spoke to Jacob. Jacob awoke and said,
how filled with Awe is this place: "*This is none other but the house of God,
and this is the gate of heaven.*"

Like Jacob, we can look at the heavens.
Before dawn we gaze at the "Harvest Moon,"
Orion walks in the Southern Sky.

As I write this sermon, I look up at
two sunflowers picked from my Garden.
A reminder of the two sunflowers in the letter "U"
And the words "*Truth Conquers*" cherished by Czech Unitarians.
In the bookcase beside my desk is a shelf of tiny treasures:
Pebbles, A Ganesh, a Buddha, a Wizard, a Dragon,
Photos of our grandchildren, and
a photo of Rev Nobert Fabian Capek, founder of this church.

98 years ago in Brno, Baptist Minister Norbert Capek was a Baptist Minister. Part of my spiritual connection with Capek is that I began my

ministry as a Baptist. Like Jacob and Capek, I struggled with the angel seeking a blessing. Capek wrote to Professor Tomas Masaryk asking, *"What do we do with people who live religiously, but who have left Rome? What attitude should we adopt toward contemporary Protestant Sects, which are in chains to all kinds of dogma?"*

Capek met Masaryk, a marvellous Universal Statesman who had taught in the United States. Masaryk's wife, Charlotte, was an American Unitarian. Out of the chaos of the First World War, Masaryk led in the creation of Czechoslovakia and became your first President. Earlier this November I thought of Masaryk as I watched Barack Obama elected President of the United States. Just two miles from the Obama home in South Chicago is a massive statue of a Czech Knight, towering over a park by the University of Chicago. The Knight is dedicated to the towering spirit of Masaryk.

I think of Norbert Capek as a knight of the spirit. In the United States as World War One came to an end, he got support from American Unitarians to return to Prague to create a Unitarian Church. His love of nature has brought the flower communion to Unitarians around the world. His love of music created hymns that have enriched hymnals around the world. The hymns he wrote in Dresden Prison are like Psalms of David. He cries "Out of the Depths." And on a winter night in the Prison yard, he writes,

*View the starry realm of heaven,
Shining distant empires sing,
Skysong of celestial children
Turns each winter into spring.*

With mystical insight he chants:

*Great you are, beyond conception,
God of gods and God of stars.
My soul soars with your perception,
I escape from prison bars.*

The 139th Psalm is a favourite of Unitarians. The Psalm proclaims God is everywhere, *"If I make my bed in HELL, Thou art there."* Its words are on the Hawaiian tomb of Aviator Charles Lindberg:

*"If I should take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea ..."*

Yes, holiness can be found anywhere. But we all know places that take on a special presence to us. Perhaps a tree reminds us of

where the Buddha sat: Or a graveyard where we remember an old friend. In California, I usually visit the grave of Joseph Fabry: a refugee from the Holocaust who brought his friend, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, to our church. Like Capek, Frankl was imprisoned in a Concentration Camp. But, partly because he was a medical doctor, he survived to teach HOPE. He wrote, "*He who has a WHY to live for, can bear with almost any HOW.*"¹¹ Frankl told us,

"Since Auschwitz, we know what man is capable of.

Since Hiroshima, we know what is at stake. ...

Each of us is questioned by life, and we answer with our own lives."

For each of us it is a good spiritual exercise to go to a country churchyard and write what comes to you. Don't "*think about it.*" Just be there, perceive, write the words that come in the moment: If you wish, just a short poem like a Haiku. Willam Blake wrote:

*"To see the world in a grain of sand
and a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour."*

The Oneness of solitude: Unitarian author Kurt Vonnegut survived the firebombing of Dresden and wrote a prophetic book, Slaughterhouse Five. He quested for the secret of art. He wrote, "*I asked many people ... when their art gave them the most satisfaction. In fact all replied without hesitation that they were at one with the universe in making a picture in perfect solitude.*"

This experience of "**Oneness**" is central to all religion. It is the name of our religion. **Unitarian is the "Oneness Church."** It is Jacob's vision of the ladder, and his later solitary "Struggle with the Angel," at the place he then names "Pen-i-el, *for I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.*"

We can also experience Oneness in Community, even in this church. In 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial I shared with thousands in the March on Washington a vision of Oneness as Martin Luther King told us, in words that have become poetry:

¹¹ Victor Frankl, MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING, Beacon Press.

I have a dream today.
 This nation shall repent
 And live the meaning of its creed,
 These truths self-evident:
 That equal are all souls,
 Endowed with certain rights;
 Life, liberty and happiness
 Are goals within my sight.

I have a dream today.
 A trumpet sound shall blow,
 Exalted shall each valley be
 And hill and mountain low
 Rough places are made plain,
 The crooked places straight,
 And from the mountain of despair
 We'll hew a stone of hope.

I have a dream today.
 When we let freedom ring
 From snow-capped peaks to sun-baked clay,
 When all God's children sing.
 And this will be the day,
 Sweet land of liberty,
 When Black and White can join and pray
 "Thank God, at last we're free."

- *(Martin Luther King, Jr. tune "Diademata"*
- *Adapted by Richard Boeke)*

The Jewish Observance of the "Day of At-one-ment" is an annual observance of forgiveness and beginning again. It is a return to a spiritual home, a **Makom**.

How do we start again? The eight days of the Jewish New Year teach a good practice. The first day the creation story is read: "*The world begins again.*" As the week goes on, you are called to give and ask forgiveness of your neighbour. Some would say, both to ask God for forgiveness, & **to forgive God** for disasters of the past year.

*"God, if you forgive my little jokes on you,
 I'll forgive your great big joke on me."*

At-one-ment is dropping the separateness of ego, opening to our connectedness with life. *"In oneness from all fear set free."* The Practice of Atonement leads to **Compassion**. Compassion like "Oneness" is central to religion. It is *"divine love,"* **Agape**, the Greek word often translated Charity or Love.

In Christianity, St. Augustine says, *"Love and do as you will."* In the Sermon on the Mount or in the story Good Samaritan, Compassion is the Right Practice of Jesus: *"And seeing the multitudes, he had compassion upon them."*

As Astronauts look back on earth from space, we are reminded of the home, the MAKOM, that is earth itself. One of the astronauts, who died as the "Columbia" burned out in space, was a Unitarian Universalist, Laurel Clark of Wisconsin. The day before she died she sent this email to family and friends:
"Hello from above our beautiful planet earth. ... I have seen some incredible sights: lightning spreading over the Pacific ... the vast plains of Africa and the dunes on Cape Horn. rivers breaking through tall mountain passes ... a crescent moon setting over the rim of our blue planet. Mount Fuji looks like a small bump from up here ... I hope you could feel the positive energy that beamed to the whole planet as we glided over our shared planet. Love to all. Laurel"

In the "Grace of Space," astronauts show we are fellow citizens of spaceship earth. In the words of President Tomas Masaryk,
*"The development of the world is working toward a universal humanity. ... Humanity, love, not only for one's neighbours, but for mankind - how am I to imagine mankind concretely? That child is mankind to me. ... Humanity does not consist of day-dreaming about the whole, ... but in always acting humanely."*²

May dreams inspire your soul. May compassion open your heart. May the gift of Oneness be yours, now & tomorrow.

***Tomorrow! Tomorrow! I love ya Tomorrow.
 You're always A Day A way! Amen***

² Quoted in Great Companions, Vol II, Beacon Press, Boston 1946, page 595

