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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Genesis 28: 10-19a, Romans 13:1-7
Holiday Reflections

As is my practice, after I return from a vacation I reflect in my first sermon some of the most spiritually significant events during my vacation. Everything has spiritual import but three things stand out.

The first was a visit to Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where Zach Paulson will go as a new student in the fall. It was precisely because of Zach's going there that we made a point of stopping at the university on our way to Portland.

Zach told me before we left that the university was across the road from the State capitol. That was our marker for finding it. The buildings of the capitol and the university are very attractive.

The capitol building is Art Deco in style and has a large, gilded logger with an ax in hand at the apex of the building. Willamette University, founded by Methodist missionaries, is a uniform collection of well-built brick buildings neatly spaced among trees and clean-cut lawns. The student population is under 2,000.

We met the communications director on the campus and she told us about the popular cross street near the campus, the intersection of Church and State streets. Many conversations take place at the intersection, she said. We drove to the place and I took a picture of the signs. The Church Street sign had a sign above it, which read "One Way." How this is significant, I'm not sure.

This had me thinking of the significance of the separation of church and state. Democracies are strong because of this separation. My philosophy of religion professor at Natal University in South Africa told the class that governments could not legislate love. Laws approximate love in their affirmations of compassion, peace and justice. Religions are a conscience to the state to ensure that laws are fair and just.

For good order, we need good government. Paul affirms this in his letter to the Romans. He writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority?"

Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good."

Government is not the church and vice versa and yet God appoints government for our good. God appoints everything for our good. There would be no purpose for government if it were not for people's good. That's why Paul uses God language for good government. It is up to the church and all valid religions to ensure that government lives up to its purpose and serves people with compassion, care and justice. That's why our denomination has offices in Washington DC and ties with councils of churches in every state capitol. Bread for the World, which we support by writing letters to Congress for poverty alleviation bills, is our part in encouraging government to support more bread and fewer bombs.

As a sign of its concern for the separation of church and state, our denomination recently sent out this news brief: "In an official statement issued on July 21, the World Council of Churches' general secretary, the Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, expressed deep concern over the exodus of the Christian community from the Iraqi city of Mosul due to threats from the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

"Tveit called these developments a 'tragedy' for both Christians and Muslims. According to local reports, Christians have been told by those in control of Mosul to convert to Islam, pay the Jizya (poll tax for non-Muslims) or leave the city. On failing to take these steps Christians are faced with threats of execution."

Needless, to say the separation of church and state opposes governments ruled by religion, which we call theocracy.

My second reflection: It took a couple of days to travel down the Oregon coast from Astoria at the top of Oregon to Crescent City, just across the Oregon/California border. We stayed in Crescent City on Saturday night and headed south Sunday morning hoping to find a Presbyterian church for worship. We arrived at Orrick at 10:50 to discover that worship at the small Orrick Presbyterian Church began at 11:00. I knew there was a Presbyterian church in Orrick but couldn't locate a worship time online.

We walked into a tiny sanctuary and were told that the church gathered around a table in the small dining room off the sanctuary. Three people were expected at worship that day. Suellen and I brought the number to five and shortly after the hour, the number rose to seven when a woman with a walker was helped in by her daughter. The worship service was more like a Bible study led by a member of the church.

Donna led the service from excellently prepared notes on the lectionary passages for the day. Halfway through, the woman with the walker sang a song. She was the church's musician. The Hebrew passage of Jacob's dream and the ladder reminded me of what seamen call "Jacob's Ladder." Suellen and I learned about it during our visit to the Maritime Museum in Astoria, which sits at the mouth of one of the most treacherous entrances for ships into a harbor.

Many ships have gone aground when crossing the bar at the point where the strong-flowing Columbia River meets the powerful waves of the Pacific Ocean. Ships nowadays are brought in by a local pilot who comes alongside the ships in a boat. A ladder, called "Jacob's Ladder" is lowered down the side of the ship. The pilot jumps from his boat to the ladder and ascends to the deck of the ship.

In Jacob's dream, angels ascend and descend the ladder. The thought occurred to me that the deck of the ship represents safety from raging waters just as the place to which the angel's ascend represents the place of peace from the ravages of life. Jacob's life is in turmoil and the dream of the ladder and angels brings him close to God and therefore offers comfort.

We discussed the significance of dreams in our Orrick meeting. I spoke about Morton Kelsey's book, *Dreams: A Way of Listening to God*. The Orrick church has been without a pastor for many years and Donna mentioned that she had a dream that a pastor would visit their church and celebrate Holy Communion with them. She shared this at the end of the meeting and I thought, "What's to stop us from doing it now" but people were already getting up to leave. God has touched my heart and I shall see that Donna's dream is answered.

Before the end of the service, I was asked to say the pastoral prayer and suggest a hymn to sing without accompaniment and I offered a benediction. Suellen and I were blessed and departed from Orrick with joy in our hearts.

The final reflection came at the movies. The second week of our vacation was spent in the Bay Area and I wanted to catch up on movies. We saw "Life Itself" about film reviewer Roger Ebert and "Boyhood" a fictional account of a boy growing through grade school and high school and entering college. Interestingly, the movie was filmed over over 12 years with the same actors.

We also saw the film "Ida" which is set in Poland in 1962 where Anna, an 18-year-old woman is preparing to become a nun at the convent where she has lived since orphaned as a child. She learns she has a living relative she must visit before taking her vows, her mother's sister Wanda. Anna hears from Wanda that her birth name is Ida.

"Ida" the film, left a lasting impact on me from an overtly spiritual perspective. While the film is ending its run in the theatres, I don't want to spoil it for you if

you have not seen it. Perhaps the best way to speak about it and to end this sermon is to pose some questions.

Please let me know and each other whether or how you see Ida as a Jesus figure in the literal sense. The word “life” is stated at a crucial moment in the film. How does Ida understand life in all its fullness at the end of the movie? Ida blesses a baby in the movie. How is the blessing poignant and ironic? The movie is filmed in black and white but the issues raised therein are far from black and white. How is this so for you?

Incidentally, the cinematography, the frames and framing are excellent.

There we have it: Holiday reflections. Please share with each other some of things that have struck you spiritually this summer. Amen.