

Jacob's Pillow and Jacob's Ladder

Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach

[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

September 12, 1999

Journey to This Place:

A Sermon for the Ingathering Service

Good morning. Let me introduce myself, since I'm the new kid on the block ... or one of them. (Any other new kids here on this block? — Mitchell ... others?)

My name is George Kimmich Beach. Not Beech as in beech tree, beech with an E, but with an A, as in, "Life's a ...". And Kimmich -- here's the hard one. Kimmich ends in an H, but just remember, "Rhymes with gimmick." Kimmich was my mother's maiden name. So I am called -- I've always been called -- Kim.

I am your interim parish minister. In-ter-im, as in for the time being. You remember Rev. David and Rev. Beverly. They were your regular parish ministers, until they moved to ... where? ... Chicago.

What's "regular"? I'll give you a fer-instance. My wife, Barbara, is here today ... and she and I are the grandparents of Alec (age 4) and Libby (age 1+). Barbara likes to be called "Nana" by her grandchildren, but they also have a great-grandmother, Barbara's mother, Elsie. Alec decided all on his own what to call them: His great-grandmother became Great Nana, and Barbara became Regular Nana.

So you know what I mean when I say David and Beverly were regular ministers. I'm the irregular minister. Interim. For a year or two -- which is time enough for us to get to know each other pretty well. In October I will visit with you in your classes, while Rev. Carol (you know her) is here with your parents and other elder friends. You see, one thing we are doing this year is knitting us together, young and old, up and down Waldron Avenue.

Tell me, do you like being here in the big church? ... Hmm. I thought so. I like being here, too. It's a warm, comfortable place. I only arrived last week, and I can tell already -- this is a place people have loved and cared for, for a long, long time. This place is hallowed -- it is made holy -- by the spirits of many people who have gone before us. Today Carol and Mitchell and I are talking about our "journeys to this place." We want to encourage you, too, to think about how you came to this place, and how you felt when you first arrived.

I want to tell you about the pathway that brought me to this place.

I have been a Unitarian Universalist minister for "a few years." Well, more than a few -- in Massachusetts, in Ohio, in Texas, in Virginia. In fact, I still have a home in Falls Church, Va., where Barbara lives and works, and where her mother (now, what do we call her? -- Great Nana) lives with her. But most recently I have been the minister in one more place I especially want to tell you about. This painting -- this swampscape -- is from there. Can you guess where? Florida. The colors are very Florida.

Last year I was the interim minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, Fla. Behind the church there is a large pond, with lots of water lilies growing in it and sometimes big exotic birds (the kind we see in the zoo), who come to go fishing and sometimes to nest. Behind the pulpit on both sides there are two large plate-glass windows looking down onto the pond. This painting (my gift from the church, when I left) could have been from right there.

I did not know, when I went to the church in Jacksonville, Fla., that you could develop a strong bond of friendship with people in such a short time -- a little more than a year. But I did know that an interim minister, almost as soon as he arrives, must look ahead to the time when he will leave. A big part of his job is to help the church community prepare for the future, when they will call a new, "regular" parish minister.

So last June I was thinking about the long journey I had ahead of me. I would be leaving Florida, and traveling 750 miles north to my home in Virginia, and then, after summer vacation, traveling another 250 miles north to ... Summit. In the highlands of the Watchung Mountains! Hmm ... 750 plus 250 makes ... a thousand miles! I knew a little about Summit. I had visited here a couple of times. And got lost a couple of times! So I had a picture of this place, but I wasn't at all sure how I'd feel about being here, in this strange new place.

Have any of you moved to a faraway place? Do you remember how you felt? Excited, and anxious, at the same time, knowing it wouldn't be the same?

I felt that way, as I thought about leaving my friends in Florida and setting out on that 1,000-mile journey, north toward Summit. I wanted, in my last sermon there, in Jacksonville, to tell the people how good I felt about the future of their church and how sad I felt about leaving them; at the same time I was excited (and anxious) about this strange new place I was going, in the highlands of the Watchung Mountains! I was preaching my heart out that Sunday -- but suddenly I got the feeling I was losing their attention. I talked louder, more emphatically, to get them to "listen up." Now I was getting really bothered -- didn't they care about me, on my last Sunday?

Then I saw several faces light up, and heard someone utter a soft "Ahhh!" I interrupted my sermon to ask, "What's that about?" And a woman said, "An anhinga." "A what?" "A snakebird," another said. Now I knew what was going on. I had seen these anhingas, called snakebirds because of the way their long, snaky necks -- only their necks -- stick out of the water as they swim along. I turned around, looked out on the pond, and I too said "Ahhh," echoing the delight of the congregation. This visitation by a rare and

wonderful water bird was like the visitation of a god, a divine spirit. It hallowed the place where we were. And everyone clapped in celebration of the joy of that moment. "Ahhh! An aninga!"

The story of Jacob's pillow and Jacob's dream is one of my favorite Bible stories. It, too, is a story of a long journey to a strange place -- Jacob's journey into the highland wilderness of Judea, on his way to establish a new home -- and his awesome discovery. It goes like this:

Then Isaac called [his son] Jacob and blessed him and charged him, ... "Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethu-el your mother [Rebecca's] father, and take as a wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May El shaddai [the almighty God] bless you and make you fruitful ..., that you may become a [great family]."

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place [in the highlands of Judea, a desolate, lonely place], and he stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head [some pillow!] and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, [the Lord] Yahweh stood above it and said, "... I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done [all that I promise you this day]."

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." [Ahhh! An aninga!] And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob arose early in the morning and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and [anointed it with oil]. [And] he called ... the place Beth-el [the house of the God].

This is the season of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. It is a time of new beginnings for all of us. From near or from far, we have all made journeys to this place.

Remember your journey, and cherish it. And may this place be for you a true home of the Spirit, a beth of the El, the hallowed ground to which you and I return again.

However far you may travel from this place -- perhaps to another continent, perhaps to a new school -- perhaps with anxiety, perhaps with high expectation -- be assured that the Spirit goes with you, to companion and uphold you, until we meet again.