

Surely the Lord Is In This Place

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
July 19, 2020

- Genesis 28:10-17 New Revised Standard Version¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ 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."
- 1 John 4:9-12 Good News Translation ⁹ And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. ¹⁰ This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. ¹¹ Dear friends, if this is how God loved us, then we should love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us.

When my older brother and I were still the only two Fancher children in family photos, our great-aunt Imogene gave us a book. (Why do adults do that kind of thing: giving one gift for two brothers *to share?!?*) It was a popular children's book of the post-World War II era called A Child's Garden of Bible Stories.¹

I do remember having it read to me, and then reading it to myself over and over during my childhood. The illustrations captured my imagination, and are still imprinted in my memory, especially the illustration that accompanied the story that we heard in today's scripture reading from Genesis Chapter 28: the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel. That illustration of a stairway between earth and heaven helped me learn and remember the story.

Let's take a moment to put this story into its biblical context. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebecca and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob may be best known by many of us from the Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing

¹ Arthur W. Gross, A Child's Garden of Bible Stories. Illus. by Rod Taenzer. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Co., 1948.

Technicolor Dreamcoat.” Jacob is the kind, old father of Joseph and the other eleven sons featured in the show.

But especially in his early years Jacob had been a schemer: as a young man Jacob figured out a way of tricking his father Isaac into conferring on *him* the family inheritance that tradition said *should* have gone to Jacob’s older brother Esau. (You can read that story in Genesis Chapter 27.)

When Esau, the firstborn son, discovered that his kid brother had cheated him out of what was rightfully his, Esau swore to get even with Jacob; indeed, Esau vowed to find and kill Jacob. For the safety of both of her sons, Rebecca quickly sent her son Jacob away from their home in Beersheba southwest of Jerusalem. She told him to go to her brother’s place in Haran way up in northern Syria, to find a wife there and settle down.

Jacob had walked purposefully all day, putting as much distance as possible between himself and his angry brother. As dusk settled over the rocky hills overlooking the Mediterranean, Jacob found a quiet spot some ways off the trail where he could settle down and rest for the night. Even using a rock as his pillow, Jacob quickly drifted off to sleep.

That’s when he had a vibrant dream. One Old Testament scholar makes this observation about dreams. In the Bible, he writes, “Dreams do not witness to the dreamer’s psychological state, working out stress or anxiety or subconscious fears; they are external forms of divine communication, in which actual encounters with God take place.”² In other words, ancient cultures believed that dreams were the work of God planting ideas and communicating important messages.

So in God’s gift of a dream Jacob saw a staircase stretching from earth to heaven. It was busy with angelic messengers descending and ascending. That certainly was meant to symbolize humankind’s prayers and pleas ascending to God On High and God’s blessings and responses descending back to earth. In his dream as he’s watching the busy staircase Jacob suddenly realizes that the Lord God Almighty is standing right beside him! God promises to bless Jacob in many ways, to accompany him and protect him and be faithful in what God promised to Jacob.

As Jacob awakened from his dream, imagine what must have raced through his mind, how his heart must have pounded. He shook the sleep from his eyes, looked around to get his bearings: patches of scrub brush on the hill above him, a small grove of trees a stone’s throw away. Yes, he was in the middle of nowhere. Beersheba was a day’s walk behind him, Haran still lay far beyond him. He wasn’t at a temple or monumental shrine; he wasn’t at some rustic, out-of-the-way hallowed site of pilgrimage.

² New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1: Genesis–Leviticus. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 542.

He was nowhere in particular. That was true as far as his trip was concerned, and also in terms of his personal life and career. He was heading off to *start* the process of finding a wife, starting a family, making a living, but he hadn't accomplished any of that yet.

Jacob was in the middle of nowhere. But in that unremarkable place at that unremarkable time God assured Jacob through that dream that God was with him. "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!"³ Jacob said aloud to no one but himself. "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!"

Do you know that the Lord is in "this place" – the place you occupy right now... the physical place... and the point in your life?

~ ~ ~

I don't enjoy talking about the global pandemic. But our pandemic circumstance does provide us with new ways of looking at life – perspectives that might not have occurred to us except for this insidious, stress-inducing viral threat.

We've been living with this pandemic for about four months now – about as long as a pro football season. The initial disbelief and puzzlement and fear have changed to a bit more understanding of what we *do* and *do not yet* know about this freakish public health crisis. One thing we know from what we see happening in Texas and Florida and California and Arizona, and southwest Ohio and Cuyahoga County: it's not over. We're not at the beginning of the pandemic, but we don't know how much longer we have to go before we can say that it's over. We're nowhere in particular.

In our daily lives there are different ways we may experience that sensation of being "nowhere in particular."

For a married person, so maybe you're not a newlywed, but neither is your marriage celebrating a milestone like 10 or 25 or 50 years yet. You and your spouse are just slogging through the everydayness of married life. In the course of the daily grind, if you even give conscious thought to the status of your married life, you might determine, "Maybe it's not all I dreamed it would be, but it's certainly a nice life I share with my spouse." You're not on a mountaintop of elation, but you're not in the valley of despair, either; you might feel like you're in the middle of nowhere.

Or... you're not the newest hire at your place of employment, but you're also not close to being able to count the months until you retire. You're not even sure that this is where you want to be for the rest of your career. In your work life you're not starting out or wrapping up; you're just somewhere in the middle.

A lot of thought and concern lately has been directed at our nation's children who soon will be starting a new school year, whether in classrooms or via remote learning or by some hybrid of the two. If your school days are behind

³ Gen. 28:16 New Revised Standard Version

you, I bet you can still recall the excitement of the first day of the new school year – fun and a little scary. And remember how that excitement quickly faded to the routine of going to school and coming home to homework, and back to school and back home for homework? It didn't take long to feel like you were in the middle of nowhere – it was no longer the exciting first day of school, but the joyous last day of school seemed so far away you couldn't even imagine it.

Yes, in our lives, so much of our time is spent “in between,” “in the middle of nowhere” – in unremarkable places, with ordinary activities, with the same people we are accustomed to being with. And yet, such routine still holds a blessing for us. For far from our ordinary days being a barren land, our lives are blessed by God's dependable presence with us every step of the way. In Jacob's words, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!”

In a familiar psalm the writer echoes Jacob's realization of God's constant, intimate presence with humankind. In the opening lines from Psalm 139 the psalmist wrote, “Lord... you have examined me and you know me... you see me, whether I am working or resting; you know all my actions.”⁴ God is with us whether or not we're aware of it.

As we heard in the New Testament letter called 1st John, Chapter 4 tells us that the foundation of our lives is God's love for us: “This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that [God] loved us...”⁵ A little later the author adds, “We love because God first loved us.”⁶ God has created us, God has created a relationship with us, and in coming to live among us in Jesus Christ God has promised to walk with us as we walk through this life.

- Yes, God walks with you on the days of elation, like when your child is born or you pass the exam or the purchase goes through or the doctor tells you you're cured.
- Yes, God walks with you when you feel you've been brought about as low as you can go by the stress of illness or by anxiety of the unknown future or by the piercing pain of grief.

As God revealed to Jacob through a dream, God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ that God is with us at the beginning and at the end, in our highs and in our lows, and in the ordinary, unremarkable, middle-of-nowhere moments where much of our lives unfold.

No matter where we are, no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in, we can echo the affirmation of Jacob and proclaim with confidence and gratitude and joy, “Surely the Lord is in this place.”

[sermons: se2020719; © 2020 Jon M. Fancher]

⁴ Psalm 139:1-3 (excerpted) Good News Translation

⁵ 1 John 4:10 Good News Translation

⁶ 1 John 4:19 Good News Translation