

### **Where Is God?©**

Genesis 28:10-19, Romans 8:12-17

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Jacob left Beer-Sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.'

<sup>16</sup> Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!' <sup>17</sup> 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.' <sup>18</sup> So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. (NRSV)

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***Where do you look to find God?*** I'm not just talking about *knowing* because we've been *taught*, that God is *everywhere*. I'm asking where are the places you go to *experience* God? A place where God is so close, so real, that when you leave you are changed, somehow.

There are two places in my own life that I can say were true, life-changing experiences. One was on a spiritual retreat ... a place where I was really looking, hoping to experience the presence of the Divine Creator. But even as I experienced it, it was different, somehow *more*, than what I expected.

It was through guided imagery ... an exercise where you are simply invited to turn your focus away from all the other concerns crowding your mind and imagine being in a peaceful, favorite place. The Pachelbel Canon was softly playing and I could imagine myself down at Snow Creek, on my parents land. It is a beautiful spot to be sitting in the sunshine on a fall day, as I had done often, growing up.

And in the guided imagery, we were invited to see someone coming toward us, and that person sitting down beside us ... then asking the questions that were burning in hearts and minds.

It was Jesus, of course. I was in seminary and had many questions about my call. And somehow, in that experience, I heard answers and came away with new certainty about what I was doing. I was changed in a way that caused me to have new energy and perseverance.

I did expect, on that retreat, to grow closer to God and stronger in my faith, but I had not expected such a personal encounter, such promise, such great renewal. To this day, the

Pachelbel Canon moves me to that place again where I meet Christ. In fact, I listen to it often when I am praying or studying or writing a sermon.

The other time was unexpected, but a time when I was seeking forgiveness, and having a difficult time accepting that forgiveness. It came in a dream ... the face of Christ and the voice of assurance.

Those are the two most memorable times in my life when something that intimate happened between God and me.

So where have you seen God? People pour into the monastery in Taize, France for personal renewal. There are many opportunities for retreats that are valuable in spiritual growth. Hopefully, you experience the presence of God here, in worship on Sundays. Isn't that the real reason why we come? To experience God? To be renewed? To fill the hunger that we humans naturally have for God? But what about those places and times where we are least expecting to find God? In our story today, Jacob has this kind of unexpected visit from the God of the covenant.

Jacob was on the run. He was there in that barren place that night because he was a trickster and he was afraid of the consequences. Regardless of the fact that God had indicated to his mother, Rebekah that he would rule over his brother, nevertheless, Jacob had deceived his father and tricked him into giving to him what was rightfully his brother, Esau's ... his birthright and his father's blessing.

The birthright he actually won with Esau's agreement. Esau was so hungry, he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. Still, it seemed a bit underhanded on Jacob's part. Why didn't he just give his brother a bowl of soup to satisfy his hunger?

But then, Jacob went to his father, Isaac, whose sight was growing dim and who did not have many days left. Jacob knew his father loved his brother, Esau most. The 2 sons were very different. Esau loved to hunt, he was hairy and ruddy and rough, whereas Jacob, we are told, was mild and did not care to go out and hunt or eat meat.

To trick his father into giving him the coveted blessing of wealth and land and family, as well as the spiritual blessing, he had to make Isaac believe he was Esau. So he covered himself with skins that smelled of animals and put lambskin on his hands to make himself seem hairy.

His father was skeptical at first, but did give Jacob the blessing intended for Esau. In ancient times, this blessing was given to one son and could not be retracted. It was in the speaking of this blessing that it began to actually be.

Needless to say, brother Esau was irate and plotted to kill Jacob as soon as his father died. Their mother, who favored Jacob, heard this and influenced her husband, Isaac to tell Jacob to leave and go back to the land of their kinfolk and to find a wife there.

And so Jacob fled, with the first blessing and another one added on to it, knowing that his brother was furious and wanted him dead. The order from his mother was that he would only

be gone a little while and she would let him know when it was safe to come home. But surely Jacob was aware, as he lay in that barren spot alone, with a stone for a pillow, that it would be a very long time, if ever, before he would see his family again.

Can you imagine being alone, in exile, fleeing for your life, knowing your guilt? I can image myself to that place, that night. I have trouble finding pillows that are comfortable for my neck. They are either too firm, too soft, too fat or too thin. But, none of them would be as impossible as Jacob's rock pillow!

Don't you suppose that Jacob may have laid there that night, wondering about what he had done, and wondering if it were really worth it?

Now, Jacob is a child of the covenant. That is a term we use in baptism, even today. Jacob was the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of the covenant that God promised with Abraham.

Up until now, we don't read of Jacob having any training in the faith or teaching about this great Covenant God who had first spoken to Jacob's very own grandfather ... Abraham. Surely he heard those amazing stories from Isaac, his father, Abraham's son. But whether he had heard them or not, it seems likely that Jacob had not had his own, life-changing experience with this God.

And here in this place, in what was probably the most desolate time in Jacob's life, in a time when he must have had burning questions on his heart and mind, God comes to him in a dream. Jacob sees this great ladder, or ramp or stairway, that is set from heaven to earth. He sees angels coming and going ... up and down the ladder ... and then he sees God himself and hears his voice and receives the blessing of all blessings!

<sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.'*

And Jacob was so surprised and amazed and fearful when he woke up. *'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! <sup>17</sup>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.'* And he made the stone he had laid his head on into an altar and he called the place "Bethel" which means "the house of God."

Jacob's story for us, is a promise that God is in those places where we least expect him. Even when we are not looking for him, he will show up and bless us. God knows even when we have been at our worst, and he loves us still and comes to us, forgiving and blessing us. We belong to him. We are his.

The Psalmist says the beautiful words from Psalm 139:

*“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”*

If you look around at one another or if you look in the mirror at home, you will see the results of the blessing that God gave to Jacob that night. The old, old promise that was first given to Abraham ... the promise of nations ... as many descendants as the stars in the sky ... that old promise has been being kept all these years and is continuing on in us.

Children of the Covenant, you can be absolutely sure that God has a plan for your life and will use you for his purpose and can show up when you least expect it and can change your life in a minute.

You belong to him. As Paul says in our Romans passage today: <sup>14</sup>*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.* <sup>15</sup>*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’* <sup>b</sup> <sup>16</sup>*it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* <sup>c</sup>

Praise God, who is so close to us that we could even call him “Daddy,” for he has truly given us new life and the gateway to heaven through his son, Jesus Christ.

There is no place you can go from His Spirit. He is with you always, even when you are not aware of his presence. Thanks be to God that He Abides with us always.

Our hymn is number 543, Abide With Me. You may remain seated as we sing.

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