

**SURELY, GOD IS IN THIS PLACE,  
AND I DID NOT KNOW IT  
JULY 19, 2020**

Genesis 28:10–19

Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep.

And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it.

Then God was right before him, saying, “I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I’m giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants.

Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they’ll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I’ll stay with you, I’ll protect you wherever you go, and I’ll bring you back to this very ground. I’ll stick with you until I’ve done everything, I promised you.”

Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, “God is in this place—truly. And I didn’t even know it!” He was terrified. He whispered in awe, “Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God’s House. This is the Gate of Heaven.”

Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. He christened the place Bethel (God’s House). The name of the town had been Luz until then.

## PRAYER

Startle us, O God, with your presence,  
in the very midst of this life of ours.  
Open our eyes to the beauty of creation, your handiwork.  
Open our eyes to your image in others —  
in all those we encounter this day.  
Open our spirits to the quiet, insistent coming  
of your Holy Spirit.  
In Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

Last week, my family and I were together in St. Paul, MN. One of the things we wanted to do was to visit the site of George Floyd's memorial.

You may remember, he was the African American man who was strangled for 8 min and 46 seconds – not being able to breathe and he eventually died. An event that troubled not just the US but the entire world.

The street, where he was killed, is blocked off. As you walk down the street, memorials are placed at different spots. Flowers and memorabilia's that reminded us of his life: a Vikings shirt, a baseball, prayer notes. Even the outline of his figure where he actually laid.

Further down, is a symbolic cemetery. Engraved in each stone is the name of an African American who was killed by police officers over the last several years. I would say at least 100 graves.

As you would be too, we were overwhelmed, grievous, and even angry - as we looked around at all the memorials.

As we started to leave the memorial, Kaden, my oldest adult child, stopped me, to notice a small sign tucked into flowers that read – "You are now home with God." And then a reminder to the rest of us: "God is in this place".

We almost missed it. I am blessed to have someone in my life who can see, someone who pays attention and attentive to details.

If you are like me, you miss a lot and spend much time searching for glasses, car keys, books, and they are usually exactly where I left them.

One dark night a man named Jacob almost missed the most important encounter in his life.

He's on the run, banished from his family and community, terrified because he has tricked his brother, Esau, with the help of their mother, Rebekah. Esau vows to find and kill him on the day their father, Isaac, dies. Jacob is his mother's favorite. Isaac, his father, is old, feeble and blind, and Esau is his favorite – who is an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter.

The brothers are twins. Esau was the first born. And, the tradition is he will inherit the family's wealth. He will be the head of the family.

Isaac plans a festive meal for his favorite son, Esau, to recognize and bless him into his new role.

The problem is Rebekah wants the blessing for her favorite – Jacob. And the two of them pull off one of the greatest scams in history. She prepares her husband's favorite meal, dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, puts goat skin on Jacob's hands and neck to make him feel like Esau. No detail is overlooked. And - it works.

Isaac gives the blessing, the inheritance, to Jacob - thinking he's Esau. And when Esau discovers what has happened, he is enraged! And promises to find and kill his brother, the same day their father dies.

Rebekah intervenes again - she sends Jacob off to the safety of her brother, Laban's household.

Years later, when they finally meet again, Esau does the most amazing thing: He doesn't kill his brother. When he sees him approaching, bowing in humble contrition—and fear—surrounded by his wives, children, and servants, Esau runs, and the brothers embrace and weep together.

But before that, the first night after the scam - after Esau vows to kill his little brother - Jacob is out in the wilderness, alone, lonely, terrified, exhausted. He has betrayed his brother and father; he has lied, cheated, stolen what was not his, and somehow, he manages to lie down to sleep at the end of that frightful day, with a stone - for a pillow.

Well, during the night, Jacob has a strange dream: a ladder stretching to the heavens; angels ascending, descending. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder," the old camp song put it; "every rung goes higher, higher."

He has this vision of God speaking, God promising: "I will be with you," God promises Jacob. "I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you home."

There is a moment when you wake up from a dream when you're not exactly sure where you are or if it was a dream or reality. When Jacob wakes up, it was dark and quiet, nothing moving but the desert wind, the rustling of leaves - maybe the morning light on the horizon. Is someone there? Did that really happen? Was it a dream? Only a dream? Jacob was afraid Esau might be out there in the darkness.

But this was an even deeper, more profound fear. Jacob was in the presence of something he did not expect or understand, something mysterious, and he was afraid. He named this place where he had met God, Bethel, which means "home of God".

I am convinced these days, that faith is when we experience the mystical - not irrational - but deep and profound and undeniably authentic.

Last winter, Chuck and I were walking our dog, on a path that follows the Mississippi River in St. Paul, MN near our house. It was late and dark and extremely frigid. And everything was hushed, trembling with the cold, softly covered with snow – and my perceptive husband nudged me to look - a beaver had poked his little head out of the ice-covered water. Looking at us curiously.

We were speechless as we watched the humility of this brave creature- In the presence of — whom or what? In the presence of an inexpressible mystery.

Fredrick Buechner says somewhere - to trust your own experience of the sacred, to pay attention when you find yourself with tears in your eyes and a lump in your throat. “I will be with you.” God is not remote but here; beyond us and right beside us. Jacob is ambushed by God.

I often need someone who will help me see the markers, the tiny wildflowers in the summer and the precious beaver poking up her little head on one of the coldest nights in MN. “Pay attention!” “Keep your eyes open.”

In these unprecedented and unnerving times, while we are disconnected to what we called normal, maybe it is an opportunity to slow down so we can see. I do not believe for a minute that God has plagued us with COVID 19 – but it could be a space to see what we might have missed otherwise. God is in this place with us.

John Buchanan quoted an article written by a psychotherapist who is also a spiritual director. She observed that most of us don't

see or experience the holy in the middle of our lives. What if we could learn to stop for a moment -many times a day? What if in those moments we could decide to notice the sheer miracle of being alive?

We would then be taking awe breaks instead of coffee breaks". I like that – awe breaks. (Gunilla Norris, "The Heart of Responsibility," Weavings, July/August 2008).

This old story reminds us: that God in the dailiness of life, in the ordinary, the common: God is in the intricate wonder of a summer flower, in the mysterious vastness of a starry night, in a three-year-old's curiosity and energy, in the smile of a stranger, the touch of a beloved. God here- in the earthiness of life. (Buchanan)

This old story bids us to pay attention, to slow down and see, to take awe breaks every day - as well as coffee breaks - to make time and space for God to be with us and touch us.

And this old story promises the most important thing I can think of: "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go."  
"I will be with you and keep you wherever you go—and I will bring you home." I believe that is so true.

Ordinary moments are sometimes sacred moments. Sometimes we have to look with more than our eyes and listen with more than our ears. Sometimes there is more to knowing than understanding – with your head.

"Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are everyday moments, the moments that if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . . a garden, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination . . . what we may see - is Jesus himself." Fredrick Buechner.

“I will be with you and keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you home.”

“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.”

Amen.