

Sermon – July 26, 2020  
“Surely the Lord is in this place”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 28:10-19a

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, send the Holy Spirit to us and open your word for us this morning that we might be astonished with what we encounter. Amen*

Good morning! It is great to be back with you both in person and live on Facebook. Kay and I are back from vacation. Last Sunday we had the privilege of joining with you in worship via the Facebook livestream and that enabled us to get a better idea of what people on the live stream are experiencing as they join with us for worship. I would like to express my thanks to Kevin Mooers and everyone who helped fill in for me while I was away.

Let's return to our journey through the Old Testament. Let me remind us of a few steps that are not on our journey this summer, but are key steps in the story of God's people. Isaac has taken his family on a journey to Gerar and, like his father, Isaac has caused issues in a foreign land by telling the people there that Rebekah is his sister. God has blessed Isaac's efforts in that land with abundant production of wheat and successful wells dug for water. Esau has married a Hittite woman, a woman of the land. This marriage makes it difficult for Esau's heirs to be given the land as now they have a connection to the land through this marriage. Jacob, covered with goat skins and with the help of his mother, has stolen the blessing and has been named the heir to Isaac. Esau is not happy with this development and is now waiting for Isaac to die so that he can kill Jacob and claim the inheritance. Rebekah has discovered Esau's plan and has Isaac send Jacob away to her family to get a bride. And when Esau learns that his marriage to the Hittite woman does not please his family, instead of making a journey himself to the land of Abraham, he goes to Ishmael and marries one of his daughters. Now my quick summary does not do justice to the stories that we encounter of God's people, our people. I encourage you to read these stories in the book of Genesis and to follow along as we journey with our ancestors through our story.

Let's look in more detail at this morning's scripture. Jacob's trip from Beer-sheeba where he left his family to go to Haran is several hundred miles, and he appears to be making that trip alone on foot. He will travel north from Beer-sheeba going through the cities of Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethel, and Shechem. At Shechem, Jacob will join the main road that will take him to Damascus, and from there he will turn south to Haran. He does not travel with servants and camels as Abraham's slave did when he traveled this route going to find a wife for Isaac. We should also notice that unlike Isaac, Jacob, the apparent heir to God's covenant promise, is leaving the Promised Land. As he leaves, there is a question of "Will the heir return?" and more importantly, "Will God go with him as he leaves the land?" As Jacob flees so does God's plan for his people. There is now much uncertainty surrounding God's plan.

This stop is early in Jacob's trip, one of the first few nights. Bethel is thought to be about sixty miles from Beer-sheeba, the starting point of Jacob's journey. As Jacob travels, he has time to think over what has happened that has led to this journey. He has been successful in getting the birthright from Esau and blessing from Isaac needed to make him the heir of the property and leader of the family when Isaac dies. But now he is cut off from his family. He is alone in the wilderness and on a journey of uncertain outcome. Jacob has no wife, no children, or anyone with him. He is alone on this journey. And on this day, he is not able to reach a town or village, and so must sleep out in the open with the stars forming a canopy over his head, the ground for a bed, and a rock on which to rest his head.

We should notice that in the NRSV translation the words "a certain place or the place" occur three times in verse 11. This alerts us to the idea that this is not just any place, but is the place, a place where one might encounter God. Notice the action words in these verses. Jacob comes to a certain place, takes a stone of that place, and lies down in that place. Jacob takes a stone of that place and puts it under his head and goes to sleep unaware of God's presence. Now to me, this does not sound like a very comfortable way to sleep. Has anyone ever tried to use a stone as a pillow? How about trying to sleep outside on the bare ground?

Now we come to one of the more familiar scenes in the Old Testament, the dream of Jacob's ladder. It is familiar because of a song about it, but today on this stop in our journey, we encounter it fresh with one of our ancestors, the one who saw it in the dream. Translators have a difficult time deciding what word to use for what Jacob experienced in his dream. Some will use ladder and others stairs. It is a Hebrew word that occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible. We

should notice that Jacob sees angels going up and down on this structure, which is not something we think of occurring on a ladder, but on stairs. Notice that these messengers are seen taking reports from earth to heaven and instructions from heaven to earth. God is seen as very involved with His creation in an ongoing manner. While the translation for this word is not clear, there is good agreement among scholars that this structure Jacob witnesses represents Jesus. If we look to the New Testament, we will find that it is Jesus who brings together heaven and earth. He is the means by which heaven and earth are reconciled, the means by which God's love comes to us and our service is given to God. It is through Christ that God dwells within us and we dwell in God. It is through Christ that we are able to go to heaven. Jesus is the way to the Father. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Colossians 20, "And through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." What Jacob glimpses in this dream is an image of a descendant to come who will be this connection, this way between heaven and earth.

And as incredible as that aspect of this dream is, Jacob also sees the place where heaven touches earth and recognizes it as a holy place. But God is not done with just showing Jacob these things. Notice the presence of God comes and stands beside Jacob and speaks to him. God does not call to Jacob from heaven, but is close enough to speak to him. Notice that God is present with Jacob, who has just deceived his father and stolen his brother's blessing and is fleeing for his life from his brother, yet when God speaks to Jacob, God does not rebuke or chastise him, but speaks an incredible promise to him. And we should hear in this promise given to Jacob the promise that Christ gives to us. He comes to us where we are and speaks to us, not about our sin, but about the love that he has for us. In Jacob's dream, God is seeking to interact with Jacob even though Jacob is not looking for God. So also, Christ comes looking for us even when we are not looking for him, not to judge us but to set us free from our bondage to sin.

Listen again to the words of promise that God speaks to Jacob, "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; 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."

When God speaks this promise to Jacob, He identifies Himself as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, but not the God of Jacob. Jacob does not yet know this God. This is the

first time in the Old Testament that Jacob has heard the voice of God. Remember, Jacob is fleeing for his life because he has taken what is not his from his brother, and yet God makes this promise to him. Do we think God is done with Jacob? No. Jacob's name means one who supplants. His name does not yet mean one who will follow God. When God speaks to Jacob, he speaks to one who supplants and not to a God follower, or one who strives with God.

God also tells Jacob, "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." This is a promise to Jacob to go with him on this journey and, more importantly, to go with Jacob as he journeys into a relationship with God. This promise to Jacob is also a promise to us as his descendants. God promises to be with us. God does not promise Jacob that everything that happens in his life will be a rose garden, just that God will always be present. This is the promise that Jesus makes to us as well; he will never leave us or forsake us. We like Jacob will experience trials in our lives, and if we will allow God to remake us through His presence in those trials, we can be reshaped into one through whom God can bless others around us.

I like what the scripture tells us next about Jacob. It says when he heard these words he wakes up and he realizes that the presence of the LORD is in this place. That is my prayer for us this morning, that as we hear these words, we too will wake up from our slumber. I pray we will realize what God is calling us to do. As Christ followers, we are called to take the good news to all people, and as we go God promises to be with us wherever we go in response to this call. Wake up! God's words point to the offspring of Jacob being a blessing to all the families of the earth. God's words here point to an offspring, Jesus, who is the blessing for all people. This is the greatest blessing we can or will ever receive. It is the free gift given by God when we turn from our sin and believe in Jesus Christ and understand that he died for our sin. Jesus has taken away our trespasses, and through Christ, God has thrown our sin into the sea of forgetfulness. This is the steadfast love of God. God comes to Jacob with the promise of steadfast love instead of condemnation for what Jacob has done. Jesus comes to us the same way, not to judge but to save us from the just reward of our sin. It is through Jesus this promise to Jacob is fulfilled. And we as the body of Christ here in this place, or any place we are sent, are to be those who are still taking this blessing to all people. We prayed earlier for another great awakening to occur in our midst. We are to be those who are awake and looking for an awakening of people around us and,

until it happens, we are to be busy sowing for that time. Where will we sow the love of Christ today, this week, this month, or this year?

In his comments on the Old Testament, John Wesley states this idea of Jacob's encounter with God in this unexpected place so well. He writes, "We sometimes meet with God there, where we little thought of meeting with him. He is there where we did not think he had been, is found there where we asked not for him." Have we been places where we were not planning to meet God and met the Lord there? A place where we did not expect to find him? Christ is with us; Christ is at work around us. If we go out with him into his mission, we also will meet God in those places where Jesus is at work. This is our call to take Jesus with us and to be a blessing that shares the Good News of Jesus with all we meet, even those whom we think will never respond to the steadfast love of God.

Evangelism is being willing to take the word of God to hostile places. It is what we see the disciples do, and it does cost them their lives, but they do it anyway, because they have learned that when they obediently do this, the Holy Spirit shows up and the place where they are becomes a place where others can encounter God and come to know the love of God through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a place where some will hear the Good News and they will be forever changed. It is a Christ follower walking into those unlikely places filled with unwelcoming people and sharing the steadfast love of the Lord. It is a group of people fully awake and going about God's mission to bless all of the families of the world.

As Jacob fully awakens, he becomes afraid because God is in this place with him. This is not just fear of God but awe of God. This is surprise at the joy of being in God's presence. This is us realizing God is present even though we are not worthy of God being with us. Notice what Jacob does. He gets up early in the morning and takes the stone that he had under his head and sets it up as a pillar, a marker, and he anoints it with oil.

Can you remember the place or places where you have encountered the presence of God? Did you mark that place? Can you remember them, some of them, any of them? Is our community filled with stones that have been set up that mark places where we have taken Jesus and someone has encountered him? I think our community should be a place where everywhere we look there is a stone set up as a pillar that marks a place where we dared to share the love of Christ, even in a hostile, unreceptive place where we do not expect God to show up. We are to be those who take the Good News of Jesus Christ out into places where we never believe that

Jesus will be received and be ready to share the Good News, so that another person will set up a stone in those places. Are we ready? Where is Jesus working that we don't expect him to be? Yet if we will be the blessing in those unexpected places and share the Good News, Jesus will show up in us through the power of the Holy Spirit and lives will be changed.

Jacob calls the place where he encountered God, Bethel – the house of God. Scholars debate where this place is, they don't know. Yet I think we have all been to Bethel, the house of God, the place where we encountered a living God, where we experienced the awe of the steadfast love of God as a person who did not deserve to encounter God. I think if we will look into our hearts, we will find those places where we would set up a stone and say, "Surely God was in this place as there I encountered the steadfast love of the one true God, through his son Jesus Christ because another Christian came there to me and shared the love of Jesus Christ with me. There in that place I set up a stone, a pillar in my life, that is there to this day." Maybe for some of us that was here in this very building. Maybe it was in a hostile place where we were not looking for God but another believer brought Jesus there and shared him with us. Maybe it was in our home or grandparents' home where God's love was lived out each day. Maybe it is here in this place today, right here, right now. Can you remember those places in your life? Can you remember the stone you set up?

Where is God leading each of us to go and share Jesus Christ so that a sinner, a lost person, a broken person, may be made whole, may be allowed to encounter God and wake up and know that the LORD is in that place? Where are we to go that those we meet will set up a stone in their lives to mark that place? Jacob called that place Bethel, the house of God. Surely the LORD is in that place and he did not know it. Surely God is at work all around us and we do not know it. Lord, open our eyes, wake us up, and call our names that we might be those who will enable others to encounter the living God.

*Pray with me: Lord, I pray that you would wake us up to your holy presence in this place and all the places you send us. Lord, guide us to be people who praise you for the stones that we set up in our lives when another shared the steadfast love of God with us, and we realized that we were running away from God and yet God was with us. Lord, here we are. Send us out to be those who share the good news of Jesus Christ in hostile places. Lord, guide us to those who are not looking for you in the places they are and yet need to set up a stone in their life. Here I am, Lord, send me. Amen.*