

“Surely the Presence”

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Genesis 28:10-22

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Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it at his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

And he dreamed.

Behold! There is a stairway set up on the earth, and the top of it reaches to the heavens.

Behold! The angel-messengers of God are ascending and descending on it!

Behold! The Lord stands over against it and says, *“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. 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold! 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.”*

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, *“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”* 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.”*

Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put at his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bet-El, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, *“If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”*

Genesis 28:10-22

My translation, based on the English Standard Version

For Jacob, it was nowhere. Sure, there was that Canaanite settlement nearby. For whatever reason, however — maybe because he was not Canaanite, maybe because that’s where his brother might go looking for him — Jacob stayed clear of it. He was safer out here, alone.

Here he would spend the night. Why here? Well, it's as far as he got before the sun went down. If he had started out earlier or later, or gone a different way, or moved faster or slower, he would have stopped somewhere else. This just happened to be the place. Jacob knew nothing about it. That didn't matter. He wouldn't be staying long. Just one night. Alone.

He was on his way to find a wife. His extended family lived days away, up north. Folks thought it best to marry from within one's own clan. At least you know your relatives! This official reason for Jacob's trip was as commonplace as "boy meets girl." Until he met her, though, he would be alone.

The *real* reason for his sudden departure was also ordinary. Siblings feuding. Families fighting. Deceit and betrayal breaking the peace. Some call that "home for the holidays." All-too-common. Jacob had made a big mess, and he was running away from it. Alone.

He found a good-sized stone and placed it close, beside his head. Some say he rested on it, and maybe he did. All we know is he kept the stone close by, and while it was not an ideal pillow, it would be a useful weapon. You know he was alone, didn't know anyone, and could only imagine what surprises might be lurking in the darkness.

Well . . . he soon found out.

II

Leading up to Christmas, I was talking about how Jesus calls us to "step out of our boat" (our "boat" being whatever safe place we are in, or whatever circumstance we are used to). He calls us to "step into the waves," and come to where he is.

But where is Jesus?

We're now in Epiphany. It's about how God shows Jesus to us, and the whole world. God shows us the fullness of who Jesus is, the depth of what Jesus has done, his glory and his grace.

But where is God, who is showing us?

Since September, we've been starting our worship saying together: "*Surely the presence of God is in this place. Help me to notice.*" We want to experience God in this time and this place. Then, we've been finishing worship with, "*Wherever you may go, surely the presence of God will be there. Help me to notice.*" What we do together here is a sort of training for experiencing God in other times and places.

Do you notice, now, where those lines come from? "Surely the Lord is in this place!" That's what Jacob said when he realized he was not alone.

III

Maybe it is a ladder. Or a stairway. Or a stepped ramp, because those were used in temples of the time. Whatever it is, human hands did not build it. It is no one's idea, certainly not Jacob's. He sees something from God.

Notice, it is not for him to climb up. Many spiritualities envision us making our way to the Divine. But Jacob keeps his back firmly flat on the ground. It's God's messengers who are coming down and going back. The wording is unclear, but it might be that even the Lord Almighty comes down it too, and stands beside Jacob. (It's a dream, a way of imagining the very real presence of God.)

Notice, God does not say what we'd expect. Jacob is a cheating scoundrel. But God does not rebuke him. No! God promises, assures, and blesses him.

Yes, a blessing! Until now, Jacob has been scamming and scheming to get blessed. But now the blessing — the Lord's blessing — comes to Jacob. Not earned. Not asked-for. Not anticipated. Not expected. God simply gives it. Jacob will be blessed.

And get this. Until now, Jacob has been bad news for those around him. But God will use him to be a blessing. God will bless him so he can bless others. God will bless Jacob's children and descendants (and they will be many) so that they can bless others. All families everywhere will be blessed through this one family, Jacob's family.¹

Jacob wakes up from his dream, and his dream has wakened him up to what he has not seen before. Nothing has changed about this place. It's exactly as it was when he came upon it. What's changed is what Jacob sees, what Jacob notices, what Jacob knows.

This is a God-place. God is here! I had no idea. But now I see what was always true.

IV

So what was it about that place? Was it special? Why?²

Is God only in special places? No! God is everywhere, and inside everywhere, and beyond everywhere. Maybe a place becomes special because we've experienced God in that place. That's why for many of us, a church sanctuary is precious; we experience God here. While for others among us, this is a convenient space but we experience God's presence elsewhere. Or, nowhere.

¹ This universal blessing has already been spoken of in the story of Abraham's family (Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:28 and 26:4). Now, it becomes focussed on the most unlikely of Abraham's clan, Jacob (whom God will later rename "Israel").

² This and what follows has emerged in large part from engaging with, and learning from, a project carried out by my friend and colleague, Larry Doyle. Lawrence P. Doyle, "Coram Deo: the Presence Project" D.Min project report, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur GA, 2016.

If God is wherever you are, how would you know?

Why don't we experience God's presence always? What keeps us from experiencing the presence of God?

One way of seeing the Bible is as "a chronicle of God's sacred presence and humanity's halting response."³ Something I learn from the Scriptures is that sometimes people don't experience God because God decides they are not going to experience God. We're not in charge of the divine-human encounter! God's not at our beck-and-call. An experience of God can't be conjured up with the right religious or spiritual techniques.

I also learn that if we are living our lives out-of-step with God — that's what sin is — we are not ready to see what God is doing. God is still with us, of course, but we've fractured our souls so we don't notice, and maybe don't want to.⁴

And I also learn that even when we're like Jacob, a spiritual and moral mess, God can still choose to break through and make Godself known to us.

God did not become present to Jacob. Jacob did not make God present. God let Jacob "see" God's presence.⁵

V

How might God be letting you see God's presence?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner said, "*The beginning of knowing about God is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are.*"⁶

Paying attention. It's a habit we form by practice. We practice attentiveness.

Because wherever you are, "*Surely God is present in that place.*"

Here in worship? Yes! And everywhere else too! Here, we practice attentiveness so we can then practice it elsewhere.

³ Ibid, 34.

⁴ This are aspects of why we don't experience God's presence that I think Larry neglects in his project report: God's freedom to be experienced or not-experienced, and sin's power to "blind" us to God's presence.

⁵ Doyle, 37. Although, again, the emphasis needs to be on God's action and Jacob's reception.

⁶ Quoted in Doyle, 36.

How do we do that?⁷

- We surrender. We give up control of the moment. Jacob had to be asleep. Not striving. Not scheming. Not fleeing.
- We slow down.
- We receive the moment.
- We observe.
- We are open.

It's not about trying hard. That's not surrendering.⁸

It's not about long or elaborate prayers. They can get in the way.⁹

It's not about adding more time for God. It's about changing every time into a God-time.¹⁰

It's not a technique. It's just paying attention.¹¹

It can be as simple as this.

Start with the truth: *"Surely the presence of God is in this place."*

Then, an openness: *"Help me to notice."*

Then, wait. Go about things. Attentive. Aware. Open. Ready.

Surely the presence of God is in this place.

Help me to notice.

Amen.

⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁸ Ibid, 48.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹¹ Ibid.