

Sacred Spaces
Genesis 28:10-19a
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Will you pray with me?

*God of Jacob –
Use these words to remind us
that you are with us.
We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.*

You might have noticed that we started right on time today. That's because as soon as I say "Go in peace" at the close of the service, I'm getting in my truck and heading to Wyoming to spend a week in my favorite place in the world.

You will notice that today's sermon is a short one. That is because as soon as I say "Go in peace," I will be darting for that door to get to my truck and hit the road to my favorite place on planet earth.

Here in a few moments, you will notice that our lovely, wonderful, beautiful communion servers will be literally running up and down the aisles to serve you communion. That's because I have instructed them to do so, lest they delay my start to get in my truck and hopefully not get a speeding ticket on my way to my favorite place in the world.

And don't even ask, because you know what I will be doing while I'm there.

Rain or snow, sun or wind – I *will* be casting a fly rod to hungry trout in the North Platte River. I *will* spend my days rowing a boat down the river, and I *will* spend more nights sleeping under the stars than in a bed.

I will float and fish with friends for the first of couple days, but during the back half of the week, I will undertake to float 45 miles of river over four days and three nights *by myself*. I will not have any cell service for the vast majority of that time. And, most importantly, I will not be taking a laptop.

To some of you, four days alone sounds like your personal hell. But to me it sounds like *heaven*.

So on Wednesday morning at about 9 AM, when I am usually stationed at my desk in front of a computer screen and eyeball deep in writing my next sermon, I want you to think of me in paradise, saying to myself as I watch trout rise and elk cross the river, "Surely the LORD is in this place – thank God no one else knows about it!"

There are places in this world where we know without any doubt that God resides there. Mine is in the middle of nowhere Wyoming. Shazia's — God, help her — is Las Vegas, Nevada.

That's the one for me that's harder to accept. That's the one where if, while I was there, God were to show up, I'd be inclined say, "Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!"

There are places we expect God to show up, and there are places where we would *never* expect God to show up.

On the last day of my grandfather's life, my mother and I sat in the hospital with him as we waited for Death's arrival. My grandad had been sick for a long time, and we knew without a doubt it was time to let him go.

We'd been there for a couple of hours when my Grandad's home health nurse, Jackie, showed up. She was with us when they removed the breathing tube, and stayed as the death rattle took hold. As we waited, Jackie, wet a washcloth under warm water, and washed my Grandad's face. Then she lathered his face up and gave him a shave. She wet his hair and combed it. She brushed his teeth. She took out Q-tip swabs and began cleaning my Grandad's nose and ears. She took out a small pair of scissors and trimmed his ear hair and nose hair. She took nail clippers and trimmed his fingernails and his toenails.

And as I sat watching her, it dawned on me that Jackie was preparing my Grandad for death. She wasn't going to let him go meet his Maker looking disheveled.

The time came. My mom and I stood up. I took my Grandad's hand and my mom took his foot. And, as he took his last labored breaths, Jackie sang in her rich alto voice, *"Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come: 'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."* And he was gone.

Hospital room, tubes and wires and beeping machines, fluorescent lights flickering over head, the smell of death all around. And God showed up. "Surely, the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!"

I was sitting on the couch in our home in Richmond, Virginia, reading a church profile for this congregation out in Colorado Springs. I made it to the third page, and I knew in an instant and in a way that I still cannot explain that we were being called to this church.

John Calvin once said that the revelation of God is like a flash of lightning — by it everything else is illuminated, but only for a split second. I knew in that split second in way that can only be called the revelation of God. I threw the church profile over my head, and said to Christen, "Babe, I think we're moving to Colorado."

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

The first time I walked into this building was through that door over there. Hartsel was the head of the search team, and he wanted my first experience of the church to be the sanctuary. He brought me in, and my breath caught in my chest as I looked up and around this beautiful room. I stood in awe for about half a second, when across the room, I saw a shock of white hair pop up from behind a pew. It was Jim Whitford bleeding the radiators. It was a Saturday morning and no one was supposed to be here, Hartsel told me. He was worried about members meeting me before I was formally introduced as the candidate, as I was only there for an initial visit with the search team.

But, around here, saying, “No one is supposed to be here,” is sort of like saying Beetlejuice three times. It’s a sure fire to make sure the Jim *will* be here... and Richard — who also popped up from behind that pew a second after Jim.

How many times since then have we experienced the LORD in this place?

I know the name of this place: Beth-el, house of God.

You know, Jacob was a hot mess of a human being. There is no nice way to say it. He was the kind of son and brother and friend that you just never could really trust for fear that he’d stab in the back should it benefit him. In fact, when we get to our story today, he’s on the run, because his older brother, Esau, is out to kill him for his lying, cheating, and stealing ways.

So Jacob hit the road, and once he’d walked as far as he could, he looked around for a stone he could use for a pillow. He pulled it under his head, and fell asleep. Maybe it’s because he slept on a rock, but his dream that night was vivid: a ladder set up on the earth, with the top it reaching to heaven and angels ascending and descending it.

Then, all of a sudden — without a single trumpet blow or chorus of angels to warn him — God was there next to him promising him safety, children, land. “Remember,” said God, “I am with you.”

Jacob woke up while God’s breath was still stirring the air. And, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him, he knew *everything* was different: “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!”

Scripture says that he was afraid and then said, “How *awesome* is this place!” which isn’t all that far from saying, “How *awful* is this place!” When it comes to God — it’s usually a very fine line between fear and awe.

Then he took that stone that had been his pillow and he stood it up on its end like an altar. And he anointed it with oil — as if to bless it. And then, still talking to himself — just like I will be next week — he said, “I know what to name this place: Bethel, house of God.”

The first thing a church is — the primary thing, the *essential* thing before anything else — a church is *people*. And, specifically, it's *people* who have been brought together by God.

But the church is *also* a *place*. It's a place where we are reminded that the sacred is not trapped in heaven, but present here on earth with us.

And the church building is a *symbol* of that reality. It points from earth to heaven, like a ladder. It reminds us in the best ways possible that God is eager to stoop down to us and that the earth is full of possibility.

But don't be mistaken. The church is *not* a container. These four walls and this roof have no more power to contain God than heaven itself. All God has to do is poke a finger through the thin veil that separates heaven and earth, drop a ladder down through a dream, and God will be *anywhere* and *everywhere* God desires —

Like in a sanctuary on a Saturday morning when no one else is supposed to be here;

Like in a living room across country placing a new call and a new direction on a young pastor's life;

Like in a hospital room, where family sings *Amazing Grace* as a patriarch or matriarch dies;

Like in the middle of nowhere Wyoming, where the coyotes sing their high and lonesome songs;

And — God, help us — even in Las Vegas...

Don't be mistaken. Our church is here to *point* to God, not to *contain* God.

So, how will he know *where* to look for God?

Fred Craddock tells this story:

"I recall as a youngster having to go get the little red mule we used to plow. We had a little truck garden — tomatoes and cabbage and peas — and we plowed that truck garden farm with a red mule. We never could agree on a name, so we just called it 'the red mule.' The red mule would get out. Our fences were poor, and the red mule would get out. I'd come home from school, [and mother would say,] 'Go get the red mule.'

Finding the red mule almost invariably involved going up over a hill and across the back woods where there was the family cemetery. Graves in there dated from the 1700s. It was an old cemetery, with wind whistling in the pines, the carpet beneath making it so silent it was frightening. I would make noises to break up the silence of the place. I

hated that mule taking me through that frightening cemetery in the late hours of the day, sometimes almost dark, always behind that graveyard.

When I went for the mule, I said, 'Mother, Do I have to through the graveyard?'

She said, 'There's no other way. Now when you go through the graveyard, make sure you don't step on graves. Graves are sacred ground, and don't step on the graves.'

These graves, 1791, the ground was level, the little markers leaning over, and the carpet of needles. Where *was* the grave? I remember how ridiculous I must've looked tiptoeing and taking long steps and then short steps trying to avoid what I did not know – but maybe this is sacred.

I went home frustrated with that mule and I said, 'Mama, I can't tell what part is sacred.'

And she said, 'Well, I know, it looks all the same. But if you'll just treat it *all* as sacred, you'll never miss.'

How will he know *where* to look for God?

The answer is we won't.

So we'd best just treat it *all* as sacred – every place we go, every face we meet – that way we'll never miss.

And the paradox of this is that if we'll do that – if we'll just treat it *all* as sacred – well, *that* is how the world will know that God is in this place.

Amen.