

“G O D I S N O W H E R E”

Genesis 28:10-19a

A police officer one hot summer day is watching an intersection where motorists, believing no one is coming, often drive through the stop sign. The officer finds a place in the shade where he can keep an eye on traffic. He has his binoculars ready in order to check out the license plates of offending drivers. While waiting, the officer notices a car slowly moving along a nearby creek road, acting rather suspiciously. Using his binoculars, the officer realizes the driver is his next-door neighbor. As the officer watches, the neighbor stops his car, opens the trunk and takes out a sack which he places in the shade of a tree near the creek. Then the neighbor gets back his car and hurriedly drives away. Curious about the contents of the sack, the police officer drives to the creek to check. He finds in the bag a mother cat and five nursing kittens. The officer quickly picks up the sack and its contents and puts them in the trunk of his patrol car. Using his siren and flashing lights to clear traffic, the officer drives at a fast speed to the neighbor's house where he places the mother cat and her kittens on the back step and then goes about his business.

It is not until years later that the officer hears anything about this incident. At a neighborhood picnic when people are recounting unusual experiences, the next-door neighbor tells of the day he left his cat and her kittens along the creek bank to “*fend for themselves,*” but upon returning home finds them all on his back step. While the neighbor swears that the facts of his story are truthful, he acknowledges he has no explanation for how the obvious impossibility of the cat beating him home happened. In fact, to his dying day, the man never learned that it was his police officer neighbor who had transported the cats home. I tell this silly story to illustrate that there are times in our lives when unexpected, even unexplainable, events happen.

In the scripture from the book of Genesis we heard a few moments ago we find an incident in which this is true for Jacob. A very unexpected thing happens to him. But first, a little review. Jacob was the younger twin born to Issac and Rebecca, born just a few moments after his older brother, Esau. The 25th chapter of Genesis records the incident when Esau comes

home hungry from an unsuccessful hunting trip and Jacob offers him a bowl of stew he had been cooking in exchange for Esau's birthright, which is the double portion of the inheritance which goes to the oldest son. In a moment of weakness, Esau accepts the proposed deal, a very short-sighted decision. Two chapters later we have the story of Jacob deceiving his aged and blind father by putting the skin of an animal on the back of his neck and arms, tricking the father into giving to Jacob the blessing which he thought he was giving to Esau. The scriptures clearly portray Jacob as a schemer and a scoundrel, as cunning and a cheat. He was willing to fall to the level of even cheating his brother and deceiving his father.

As you can imagine, when Esau learns he has been cheated out of both his birthright and blessing, is very angry at his younger brother. In fact, he vows revenge against Jacob. Their mother, Rebecca, whose favorite son is Jacob, encourages Jacob to leave home for his own safety. Jacob heads to Haran to the home of his uncle, his mother's brother. Being alone, cut off from his family, traveling through a barren and desolate, yes, God-forsaken, land, Jacob goes as far as he can in one day and then stops for the night. This is not a place which is considered sacred or important—just where Jacob happens to be when the sun goes down. Having left home in such a hurry that he had not taken time to pack a bedroll, Jacob takes a stone and places it under his head for a pillow. Well, that night Jacob has a dream. He envisions a ladder or stairway—the Hebrew word can be translated both ways—between earth and heaven. Commentators suggest it may have been like a Mesopotamian ziggurat—a temple tower with terraced steps used by the priests to travel between earth and heaven, between humans and the gods. In Jacob's dream he envisions angels ascending and descending on the steps. Jacob also sees God standing—either beside him or at the top of the ladder, depending on how the Hebrew is translated. The Lord is identified as the God of Abraham and Issac, Jacob's grandfather and father. Jacob is promised his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, and that he would be protected no matter where he goes.

This passage is filled with the unexpected. The fact that God offers this scoundrel such wonderful promises is unexpected. Additionally, for Jacob to experience God in this God-forsaken place is a surprise. Jacob believes he is alone, away from family and friends, even

beyond the realm of God. He stops for the night at a nameless and deserted place. After awakening from his dream, Jacob exclaims, “*Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.*” (vs. 16) Jacob sets up the rock he had used as a pillow as a pillar and pours oil on it, and names the place Bethel, which literally means, “*the house of God.*” This ordinary, God-forsaken place is declared sacred. Yes, there are places where we would anticipate experiencing God’s presence. We might name a church sanctuary, a place of natural beauty, listening to beautiful music (depending on what genre you appreciate), a time of quiet solitude, an act of kindness or generosity or service. These are the times and places we might expect to experience God. In contrast, in this biblical story Jacob experiences God in an unexpected time and place.

Janice Smith Ammon, who was member of the staff at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells about her ministry to Marianne who is diagnosed with advanced cancer. This begins a two year journey with many bends and turns: chemotherapy, surgery, recovery, more surgery, more chemo. There are ups and downs, times of both laughter and tears. Pastor and parishioner pray together often. In doing so, the pastor would often ask Marianne for what she would like her to pray. The patient would always first ask for prayers for her family and then would clasp the pastor’s hand, lean forward and say in a whisper, “*Pray that I will be OK. Just pray that I will be OK.*”

Then one Thursday afternoon the pastor receives word that Marianne has been taken to the hospital because she is having difficulty breathing. In visiting her the pastor realizes she is not going to make it this time. The end is near. The pastor feels very sad and has trouble seeing God in the midst of all this sickness and pain. The following Sunday afternoon the pastor sits in the western-facing hospital room with Marianne, Marianne’s husband and daughter. They talk little. Just sit together in silence. As the afternoon comes to an end with the sun sinking in the western sky, shadows in the room lengthen and the sun fills the room with its warm rays. The pastor describes how amazingly her anxiety gives way to peace as the room is filled with the sun’s rays. Clearly death would take Marianne that night. Her disease has not been healed, but she is OK, as had been her prayer. Marianne would soon be relieved of her pain and limitations. The pastor suggests that hospital room, even though death is lurking, is transformed into one of

the most sacred places she had ever been. Indeed, my experience is that to be present at the moment of physical death is, yes a time of sadness and grief, but can also a holy time when God is uniquely present as a person makes that transition from this physical life to a spiritual one where God is more fully present.

Yes, God comes to us in unexpected times and places. Some places are surprisingly holy—kindergarten classrooms, art museums, libraries. Some places are painfully holy—hospital rooms, cemeteries, prisons. Some places are obviously holy—a summer garden, a fall sunset, a mountain scene, a spring shower. Some places are deceptively holy—thrift shops and food pantries. One writer spoke of sacred chairs—the one on the porch where you listen to the rain, the chair at the kitchen table where you read your Bible, the chair in the living room where you pray, the chair in the children’s bedroom where you rock your child to sleep, the car driver’s seat where you listen to the radio and realize you are singing along with it. These places are not holy as the result of our efforts, but we recognize they are holy because they are where we experience God, often unexpectedly.

Allow me to close by speaking about my sermon title. It is purposefully written without proper capitalization or spacing between the letters. You maybe have noticed that these letters can be read two different ways. For much of Jacob’s life he would have read it, “*God is no where.*” He had little interest in God and there was little evidence of God in his life. Then as the result of a strange dream in which he experiences God while envisioning angelic figures ascending and descending on a ladder in a place he perceived as “*God-forsaken,*” Jacob would read these same letters as “*God is now here.*” Do you remember Jacob’s words when he woke up from his dream? Jacob said, “*Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.*” (vs. 16) Indeed, the message of this biblical story is that **God comes to us in unexpected times and places, in unexpected persons and ways.**

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