

Genesis 28:10-19
Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23
Romans 8:12-25
MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

God the Unexpected

Jacob said, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it; and he was afraid...”

Jacob was taken by surprise by God. The patriarch Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, was on his way from Beer-Sheba in the south of the Holy Land back to his people’s ancestral homeland Haran, in northern Iraq/southern Turkey, to seek for a wife from among his tribe in accordance with his father’s instructions. He was camping out, and used a stone for a pillow, this being a long time before Eastern Mountain Sports and Northface made camping more comfortable

He was not, as far as he knew, camped at a place of worship or camped during a particularly holy season, nor does the text mention whether or not it was a Sabbath. He was not even on a trip with, he thought, primarily religious implications: he was looking for a wife *and* escaping from his brother Esau, who for understandable reasons was plotting revenge against him. Also, Jacob was not exactly the most devout person at this time in his life.

And he was asleep.

All of these were reasons Jacob was *not* in the least prepared for God to reveal God’s self to *him*, offer him a vision of angels on a ladder stretching from heaven to earth and speak to him *personally* and *unilaterally* renew the covenant God had made with Jacob’s father and grandfather with *him* and “with his offspring,” of whom he had exactly zero at the time of this experience.

He was afraid just as someone might be who had somehow wandered into an area usually locked, barricaded and marked “authorized personnel only” *and* “wear protective gear to defend against lethal radiation.” The ancients believed that an encounter with the Divine might immediately transport them into the Divine Realm – i.e. Heaven, i.e. kill them – and in any case Jacob felt utterly unworthy to have such an experience, as indeed anyone in his or right mind would feel.

Despite Jacob’s unworthiness, despite his complete lack of preparation, despite his not even having prayed before he went to sleep, *God came and spoke to him*. Afterwards, Jacob scrambled to *mark* the place of his dream as a sacred place, putting his stone on a pillar, consecrating it with oil, naming the place Bethel (“House of God”), vowing devotion to God (if God kept his promise to him as revealed in the dream) and, finally, filling out his pledge card. (He vowed to devote to God a tenth of all he earned –

he tithed. Those last two items are the final verses of this chapter, beyond this morning's reading.

Bethel became an important site of worship for Jacob's descendants for centuries, and you also have seen a few Jewish synagogues named "Temple Bethel" today.

My point from this story for us is: God is everywhere. There are no limits to God's presence – no limits of place or time. And God can come to us when we're awake or asleep, when we think we're "prepared" (hah, hah) and when we know we aren't prepared. It doesn't matter. God is not limited by our little constructs. Those who expect that their most profound spiritual experiences will be on pilgrimage to the Holy Land may instead be vividly aware of God's presence and guidance while in their kitchens. Those who expect to have their peak religious experience for the year on Christmas Eve may have it instead, say, in the middle of July. Those who think only church buildings and services are the places and times to encounter God may have a sense of unusual awe and wonder while, say, hiking up a mountain called Carter Dome in the White Mountains of New Hampshire as I did 42 years ago this summer. And the only time (so far) I've seen an angel was while driving up route 27. The angel was there to deliver a message of very good news, part of the job description of messengers of God, who also can be anywhere anytime.

Nearly all of the Bible does not take place inside any house of worship or during a service of worship. The Bible is the account of God's dealings with humanity and some specific people during specific periods of time. From it we learn, among other things, that God can decide to encounter anybody any place at any time.

I won't say "So be prepared" because we cannot be fully prepared for an encounter with God. I will say, "Be aware", for God could tap you on the shoulder at a place and time you really, really do not expect and offer or tell you – God knows what. Our lives as Christians and as children of God are lived everywhere, 24/7; we never stop being Christians or children of God – so let's remember that, too, when we choose our activities! Ever do anything you wouldn't want God to drop in on?

The assurance of God's omnipresence, omnipotence *and* personal care for us permeates one of the greatest of the Psalms, Psalm 139. This was written by someone who knew how *thoroughly* God knew him – *and* that God nevertheless cared profoundly for him in every circumstance of his life.

"Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" The psalmist knew what Jonah had to find out the hard way, that it is impossible to run away from God even if we might want to. Depression cannot separate us from God: "If I say 'Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,' Darkness is not dark to you [O Lord]; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike." Not even death can separate us from God, and affirmation which anticipates Paul's great finale to Chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans.

But if wicked people prosper unchecked, isn't that proof of God's absence, or apathy or perhaps powerlessness? Not at all, the Bible says frequently, including in today's Gospel passage about "the weeds in the wheat." Those who do wicked things will face the consequences of their deeds on Judgment Day but they are not necessarily "uprooted" now. This should *not* motivate us to be passive in the face of wrong-doing but to recognize that *all* wrong-doing will not be eliminated until Christ returns on Judgment Day, and the perseverance of evil in the world does not mean God is unaware or uncaring. Evil-doers are given a chance to change – and some do – due to God's grace and mercy, but at the time of God's choosing the Final Judgment will come.

God is present with us – whether we expect God or prepare for God or are aware of God or not. Christ is named Emmanuel – God with us – wherever we go, whatever circumstances of life we face, no matter how much wickedness we may see. Indeed, part of Christ's story shows us how *God suffers* as a result of wicked deeds, and that if we suffer in the same way, we are sharing in that part of Christ's ministry, and God is then with us in that specific way.

In the meantime, we live in **hope** in the assurance of God's powerful and tender presence with us wherever we go and whatever we go through.

Paul, who knew something about suffering, declared in today's excerpt from his Letter to the Romans, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."

So let us be aware that brief glimmers of the coming glory may be granted to us by God anywhere, anytime – in time of spiritual or physical anguish or joy or maybe in our dreams. If that happens, save that pillow.

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