

**Awakening to God's Presence**  
**Genesis 28:10-22**  
**November 25, 2018**

So here we are, right now, at this point in our lives, within the swirl of our world's political and economic uncertainty, within the ongoing drama of the world's distresses, its upheavals, and its wars; here we are: a child, a mother/father, teenager, parent, grandparent, widow, with all the stuff going on in our lives; yes here we are facing physical pain, surgery, doubt, a breaking relationship, decisions to make; yes, here we are with our mistakes, faults, sins. Right here in the middle of our life right here and now is where God meets us. I don't have to be in a different place; I don't have to be someone else; no, I can be here, in this place, just as I am. That is where God meets us!

While we often expect God to meet us in the holy, sacred times and places in our lives: in church, at prayer, in study groups, in committee meetings, in our church service to God. That is where one expects to find God's presence, is it not? But it is often in the unexpected places where God comes close. When you least expect it, suddenly God's presence overwhelms us and blesses us with grace. Sometimes when we are going through tough times in our lives there in the midst of our anguish and fears God comes close with words of support. It's not something that comes naturally to us for we tend to get caught up in ourselves in times of stress and trouble. But being aware of God even in the unlikely times can be practiced and is possible. But practicing God's presence in our lives isn't easy. I am usually tempted to be somewhere else, at some time in the future, just not here now. We all want to be independent, in control of our lives and ourselves.

Think of that interesting interaction between Philip and Jesus in the Gospel we read. Jesus has told them all that the way to God goes through him. Philip, the practical man of the group, asks: *Master, show us the Father; then we'll be content.* In other words, we need a road map. *Jesus responds: You've been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don't understand? To see me is to see the Father.*

The disciples have seen God through Jesus in all the ordinariness of his human interaction with life. And they have been awakened to God's presence, not only through the miracles Jesus did, but also in

the everyday, down to earth, day-by-day living and his interaction with people of every description.

I'm sure each one of us can remember a moment, a place, a time in our lives when this awakening to God's presence happened for us. I remember a time sitting on a summer seat in Victoria Park looking out over the North Sea. It was my hometown. I sat gazing out at the lighthouse 12 miles away on the horizon. The smell of seaweed, the crash of waves on the beach, the clouds flitting past above me, the red sandstone cliffs off to my left where beach and cliffs met: silence, being alone, reflecting on place and memory, praying. And in that place and time God met me. No fireworks, no voice, only presence, harmony, stillness and peace. I think at that time I was contemplating what God's will was for me and what direction I needed to go. In that presence and stillness, God spoke through the silence.

The promise that Jesus offered that he would be with his followers through all of life. But really how do we make that promise ours, and especially when we find ourselves in trouble? It is right at this place in our lives, in the dark and fearful places, that we need to experience God's gracious presence. It's when my life is out of my control, when doubts rob me of faith, when fear grips my heart; right there is when I need God's presence and grace. Are we open to that?

Our story from the Old Testament today is also a familiar one. Jacob is on the run from his brother Esau. Jacob has led a fairly sheltered life up till now. Of the two boys he has been his mother Rebekah's favorite and was comfortable within the home setting. His brother, on the other hand, is a hunter, a man acquainted with the wild of the countryside. Who would you bet on to win in this conflict: Jacob trying to escape his brother, or Esau who is the skillful hunter? Rebekah pleads with Isaac to allow Jacob to go to her family's land and find a wife. Isaac agrees and sends Jacob off with his blessing and with the promise that God would be with him.

So let's settle in with Jacob for the night. What might he have been thinking? Of Esau? Of the uncertainty of his future? Of his family he has left behind—an aging father and a doting mother? Of what that blessing from Isaac would mean in his life? Of the dangers that surround him in the dark? Here he is far from the comfort and security

of his family tents. Alone, darkness descending, silence that can be felt in that wilderness place.

He takes a stone for a pillow and settles down into a deep sleep. He dreams of a ladder that rises right up into heaven with angels going up and down it. Then God speaks to him: *Then God was right before him, saying:*

*“I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I’m giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth... Yes. I’ll stay with you, I’ll protect you wherever you go, and I’ll bring you back to this very ground. I’ll stick with you until I’ve done everything I promised you.” (Genesis 28:13ff, The Message)*

Suddenly awake Jacob utters the famous line: *Surely the Lord is in this place-and I didn’t know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*

This ordinary campsite became for Jacob the house of the living God. He was awakened to God’s presence in the most unlikely of places. If we will learn to practice being here to God, being open to God’s presence in our daily lives, we may just bump into God. Next time your standing in line at the store, waiting at a light, sitting in a doctor’s waiting room, visiting a friend in hospital, about to make a presentation at work, between the handshakes and hellos at the office or club, we breath, *here I am Lord, and here you are.* Staying alert to God’s presence above me, before me, behind me and beside me, as the old Celts’ blessing went, I will be awake to my relationship with God as creator, Lord, Father, Spirit. This is the love in which I swim every moment, every day.

Listen again to the words of Psalm 139: *You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

By nature Jacob is a thief and a liar. He is the trickster personified! He doesn’t strike us as a person God would call to be the one through whom the promise would continue. But apparently God

doesn't always choose people that would appear on the covers of magazines that advertise success and achievement. The list of sinners that God chooses to advance the kingdom never ceases to surprise us. Jacob is certainly on that list. Certainly he was in that promised line of grace, but he seems out of sync with it. From an early age he sought to get his way through trickery and manipulation. When he emerged from his mother's womb he was grasping on to his older brother Esau's heel. The name Jacob means usurper. He lived up to his name by cheating his brother out of his birthright. He will later cheat his uncle Laban out of flocks of sheep. Jacob was at heart a charlatan, trickster and at times a downright scoundrel.

And yet, here in this desert place in the dark of night, God meets the trickster Jacob. He cannot rest on his holy lineage. It is not enough that he is Abraham's grandson! He too must make the promise his. And Jacob will. It will take years, disappointments, hardships, pain and sorry, but Jacob will claim the promise as his own. It is his name that follows Abraham and Isaac in our blessing and prayers.

We too cannot live on the faith capital of our parents and grandparent's. We, like our own children, need to make that faith experience our own. We need to pass on that faith just as Abraham and Isaac have done with their children. The promise is for us and for our children and their children after them. Doesn't mean we are perfect or holy, but we own the story as ours. Jacob would tell the story to his 12 children, just as Isaac had done for him and Esau.

May it be true for us that we can say that somewhere, sometime and someplace in our lives we will respond like Jacob and proclaim how awesome this presence of God is. Wherever it is we meet God it will be like the house of God for us.

***Amen***

