

## *This Is None Other Than the House of God*

Genesis 28:10-19a

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 23 July 2023  
Matt Matthews

A tired Jacob goes to bed. His pillow is a rock. He has a dream about God, who tells him: *I will gift to you and to your descendents a vast territory stretching in every direction. Your offspring will occupy it, God says, and they shall be like the dust of the earth. You will be rooted here. Your wandering people will find a home.* To which Jacob proclaims, “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!”

Isn't that often the case with us? God is with us always. Omniscient. Omnipresent. Here. Relevant. Dependably near at hand. And we miss it? The beauty of God's creation calls out, but we do not hear. The light of God's presence dawns, but we do not see. The hand of Jesus touches our shoulder, but absently we brush it away.

John Muir famously said, “I have heard the mountains calling and I must go.” I don't know what Muir thought about God, but when I hear the mountains calling me—and I do—I don't hear the mountain at all; I hear the voice of God.

“Surely the LORD is in this place . . . ” Jacob said.

Many of us draw the same conclusion when we see the high deserts and the canyons of the west—or the ocean, or the night sky. We see with clarity the creator when we ponder the majesty and raw beauty of the creator's creation. “God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars,” we sing awestruck and full of praise.

I've told you about Gordon McLerran before, because I've told you all of my stories. He was a microbiologist for the Texas health department during the day. By night, he was an amateur astronomer. He was estranged from the church for much of his adult life, and sometimes mad at God. He was almost always mad at organized religion—mad at its hypocrisy, mad at its humorless arrogance, mad at its mean-spirited, self-righteous pronouncements. But every time he looked into that microscope or telescope (he, actually, preferred binoculars when looking at the night sky), delightedly he saw the face of God. Eventually, he ended up back in a pew, contributing mightily to the Church of Jesus Christ. But it was in the expanse of nature that he experienced the truest of communion with God.

For Gordon and for many like him: yes, yes, *surely the LORD is in this place . . .*

Our hymnal is filled with songs celebrating the presence of God:

**Hymn #408:** There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place/  
and I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord

**Hymn #177:** I will come to you in the silence/  
I will lift you from all your fear/  
You will hear my voice/  
I claim you as my choice/  
Be still and know I am here.

**Hymn #519:** You are my strength when I am weak/  
You are the treasure that I seek/  
You are my all in all./

When I fall down, you pick me up/  
When I am dry you fill my cup/  
You are my all in all.

**Hymn #22:** God of the ages/  
God near at hand/  
God of the loving heart/  
How do your children say joy/  
How do your children say Home . . .

While God is with us always, we must admit that not only do we often times miss noticing God, sometimes, God prefers to stay just out of sight. This is sometimes God's prerogative.

Our hymns lift this aspect of God up, too.

**Hymn #1:** Holy, holy, holy!/  
Though the darkness hide thee,  
Though the eye of sinfulness/  
Thy glory may not see...

**Hymn #12:** Immortal, invisible, God only wise/  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes/  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

**Hymn #515:** The Spirit of the risen Christ/  
Unseen, but ever near/  
Is in such friendship better known/  
Alive among us here.

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Whether we see God or not, our understanding of the witness of scripture is that God is with us always. Whether God wants to be noticed or not, God is always present. Jesus puts a fine point on this. His name, first of all, is a giveaway to God's intention. His name is Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. Jesus promises I will not leave you orphaned. Jesus assures his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age."

Sometimes we see, detect, feel, and experience God's presence. Like Jacob did. Sometimes we don't. But God is with us.

Eli Wiesel tells this story in his book about the concentration camps called *Night* (a book the New York Times calls "A slim volume of terrifying power"). Three people—two adults and one child—were hung in the concentration camp while thousands of prisoners were made to watch. "Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'For God's sake, where is God?' And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where He is? This is where—hanging from this gallows . . .'" (p. 65)

If we believe God is with us, we are right to believe God is with us all the time . . . both on the mountain top and in the valley.

When we notice God's presence, we are like Jacob after that long night of vivid dreams: we are relieved and happy and ready to worship. When we don't notice God's presence, we acknowledge God is here, anyway. And we wonder: Maybe we don't notice because we aren't looking, or we aren't looking in the right direction. Maybe God chooses to step out of view. Regardless, the one who created and sustains us has not and never will abandoned us. God is with us.

Looking around the wide world, our ancestor Jacob said, "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God . . . Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!"

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The writer of the poem "Footsteps in the Sand" is widely debated. We all have heard this before:

"One night I dreamed a dream. I was walking along the beach with my Lord. Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord.

When the last scene of my life shot before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. There was only one set of footprints. I realized that this was at the lowest and saddest times of my life. This always bothered me and I questioned the Lord about my dilemma.

"Lord, You told me when I decided to follow You, You would walk and talk with me all the way. But I'm aware that during the most troublesome times of my life there is only one set of footprints. I just don't understand why, when I need You most, You leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you, never, ever, during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

If we don't steal away to Jesus, thank God, Jesus steals away to us.

This is good news.

AMEN.