

Pentecost 7 – A (2020)  
 Psalm 71: Selected verses  
 Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24  
 Genesis 28:10-19*a*

Many years ago now, during a Saturday workshop focusing on worship services in nursing homes when I was in Course of Study, it was suggested that Psalm 71, spoken as a repeated prayer would be a good way to begin a nursing home worship service and I have done that to this day and will do so again when I can resume those worship services. I would read a verse and ask everyone to repeat after me:

- <sup>1</sup> In you, O LORD, I take refuge;  
 let me never be put to shame.
- <sup>3</sup> Be to me a rock of refuge,  
 a strong fortress, to save me,
- <sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are my hope,  
 my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
- <sup>6</sup> Upon you I have leaned from my birth;  
 it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
- <sup>9</sup> Do not cast me off in the time of old age;  
 do not forsake me when my strength is spent.
- <sup>17</sup> O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
 and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
- <sup>18</sup> So even to old age and gray hairs,  
 O God, do not forsake me,
- <sup>22</sup> I will praise you
- <sup>23</sup> My lips will shout for joy . . .

These are beautiful words and the Psalm reminds us that God is always present with us and we can depend on God's care from birth to death. An ever-present God in the Psalm is a comfort.

However, maybe having someone looking over our shoulder is not always a comfort. I have heard someone say that phone records can be collected via the flashlights on our smart phones. Have anyone ever recommended to you to cover the camera on your computer with electrical tape. Your cell phone knows everywhere you go. Maybe having someone looking over our shoulder isn't such a comforting thought?

It may not have been for Jacob in our Bible reading today. It seems on the surface to be a rather innocuous story, but Jacob is traveling because he's on the run. When we pick up the story, he's already made a mess of things. He's cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, deceived his blind old man into giving him the blessing meant for Esau, and is now on his way to stay with relatives because things have gotten too hot for him back home. His name doesn't mean "grabber" for nothing.

Jacob was fleeing for his life! He was afraid, and he had been forced to deal with the reality, that, out of nowhere, death can come along and snatch a life away with absolutely no warning. Life is fragile.

On the run, Jacob, still in Canaan and only about one-fourth of the way to his destination in what is now Turkey, lies down to sleep and dreams. In his dream, he saw angels ascending and descending on steps connecting earth to heaven. The movement of the angels is a visible sign of the ongoing connection and communication between heaven and earth, something which has been nearly invisible in the story of Jacob until now.

Then God speaks.

And he speaks not from "up there," but standing right beside Jacob.

When Jacob awoke from his dream, the angel staircase was gone and all that was left was the rock he laid his head on. Jacob took that and poured oil on it as a way of marking it as sacred. "Surely, the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!" says Jacob as he rubs the sleep out of his eyes (v. 16). "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (v. 17). He was "afraid" -- a natural reaction to encountering the holy -- but he was also overjoyed to realize that what had once been a *nowhere place* was now a *somewhere place* because God had been there.

When we have a brush with death, our own or of someone close to us, it is then that God can become very real to us. If we happen to live through our brush with death, some are grateful to God. Some let the opportunity go by without marking it. Jacob poured olive oil on the stone that had been the pillow for his head when he had dreamed that he was about to die and was standing in the very gate of heaven. He set the stone up as a monument and named the place "Beth-el," which means "Dwelling place of God."

The point of the story is that Jacob suddenly realized that this was a holy place where he wasn't expecting one. People can get into the mentality that says only a church is a holy place and anything outside of it couldn't possibly be holy.

Where are holy places? They're all the places where we might encounter God. Whatever activity we're involved in, every place can be a holy place if we're willing to encounter God there, because God's already there.

That came home to me during a session of CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, which I took several years ago at Gunderson Lutheran Hospital in La Crosse. Each of us hospital-chaplains-in-training were asked our state of mind when entering a hospital room for a visit. I suggested that my mind-set was one in which I felt I was taking the presence of God with me in my visit. One of the leaders then asked, "What if God is already there?" That question has stayed with me ever since and given me a sense of humility.

The story we hear today helps to remind me of where God is. With or without a ritual anointing, with or without acknowledging it, is God not in every place? Of course

God is! God was not just in the place where Jacob, fleeing for his life, laid his neck on a smooth stone and had a dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth. And God was not just in the place where we come face to face with his own mortality. God is in every place.

The problem is not that God is not always there for us. The problem is that we have a sickness. We hear, but we do not understand; we see, but do not perceive. Our eyes are heavy and our ears are closed, and our hearts are hard. All this failure of faith is not a sickness of the body, but a sickness of the soul. Jesus once said, "Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand." He's talking not just about physical ears.

Every place is sacred, every place is holy, every place is important, because you are there and God promises to be there, too -- even those places that feel like a trackless spiritual desert. Sometimes it's the apparently God-forsaken places that become the most holy because God is already there, even if we did not know it at first:

- No one would put a hospital on his or her top 100 places to visit, but even in the isolation of illness and pain God is there offering healing and hope.

- There are lots of lonely places we can find ourselves -- the loneliness of grief, unemployment or a broken relationship. Like Jacob, we can believe we're all alone with no one to help. But it's in those lonely places that God often encounters us, offering a sense of his presence in the way that we need.

- We might dream of a vacation, but life often puts us in places where we experience years of hard work with little immediate gratification. Working a job, raising rambunctious children, caring for aging parents -- these are all places that require us to dig in and bed down for the long haul with what sometimes feels like a rock for a pillow. And yet, in working diligently, engaging those special moments with small children, or seeing the smile on the face of a parent who forgets us, we discover, to our amazement, that God is there with us and strengthens us to go the distance.

- Funeral homes are not favorite places to gather, but it's one of the places that most all of us will visit when a loved one dies. In fact, it's the one place that almost all of us will visit when we die, too. Even there, however, God is present and reminds us of the promise of resurrection life.

Any of these places can be a "house of God" or the "gate of heaven." Holy ground is wherever God stands beside us, reminding us that God will never leave us no matter the circumstances. Every place can be awesome, if we're paying attention. Sure, it's fun to think about traveling to exotic locales and seeing the wonders of the world. It's something we all ought to do if we get the chance. Jacob journey reminds us, however, that there are way more than a hundred places we need to see before we die. Whether it's the ends of the earth or the end of your street, it's an awesome place because God is there!

One of our hymns, UMH #418, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" reads, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder . . . we are climbing higher, higher, higher . . ." but we don't need to climb to reach God, it is God who comes to us!

You may have noticed that Jacob recognized God's presence, but he did not worship. He built no altar there. He offered no thank-offering. He made no clear sacrifice of any kind. He received the message, recognized the messenger, made a vow to God to make this God his God if God would make good on the promise (verses 20-22, not in this week's text). He marked the occasion by marking a rock. Then he moved on.

And it was enough.

The good news in this story isn't *Jacob's* commitment. It's *God's*. God was committed even to a trickster like Jacob. Before Jacob took any steps toward God, God took a step toward him. And God did keep the promise.

So just what is it that lifts our souls?

It could be that God knows us. In Psalm 139, verses 1-3 read, "God has "searched" us, God "knows" us, God is "acquainted with all my ways."

There are a lot of important people in the world who don't know you.

But God knows you!

It could be that God surrounds us. "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me" (139:5). Whether I go forward or backward, sideways, down ways, upside down ways, inside out ways! God is there. My soul is lifted.

It could be that our very life began with the breath of God: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (139:13). You are not an accident. You are not a mistake. There is a reason. Your life, your soul was inflated with the breath of God. My soul is lifted!

It could be that my body is a miracle! "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (139:14).

Many of the psalms share that thought. They tell of their experience of being known through and through by God. No matter where you are, God is there. No matter what the experience, God is with you.

That's God's promise and we have a God who keeps His promises. We have a God who does not abandon us. We have a God who keeps on loving us even when we do unlovable things. We have a God who journeys with us through our darkest and loneliest of valleys, calling us back to our best efforts, our purest motives, and our holiest longings. Maybe we all ought to sleep with our heads on a rock tonight? Try that tonight, put a stone or a small rock under your pillow, so that, like Jacob before you, fleeing past sin and facing an uncertain future, you might hear the promise of God in your heart and mind: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go!"