

Pastor's Message – 7/23/23
Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

About a month ago, I finally broke down and bought a new, larger television; I got tired of struggling to read the little numbers and text at the bottom of the screen during baseball games. Maybe you already have one, but it's my first "smart" tv, connected to the internet and, as I've scrolled through the options, it has "learned" the programs I've stopped on and is now recommending programs for me. Not sure if that is a good thing.

Maybe you have a relationship with the barista at your favorite coffee shop and they have your usual order on the counter even before you speak it. Or maybe you order the same thing at your favorite restaurant, and they know what you usually order before you even have to ask for it. Maybe you and your spouse finish each other's sentences. That kind of intimate knowledge runs through Psalm 139, one of our Bible readings for today.

Psalm 139 has some of the most lyrical and troubling lines in the whole Book of Psalms. Some Bibles will give this Psalm the heading: "The Inescapable God." That theme runs throughout the psalm's twenty-four verses, except for verses 19-22, which we have skipped today. The psalm is all about God's intimate knowledge of the writer. There is nowhere we can go, nothing about us, that God doesn't know.

This is all well and good, of course. Everyone may like the idea of a God who knows you and still loves you. But there may be times when we're not all that comfortable with a God who knows everything about us: everything we do, everything we say, everywhere we go, every thought we think.

Perhaps it might be helpful to read Psalm 139 in the context of another biblical story. Another of the suggested readings for today, from Genesis 28, offers us the opportunity to hear this psalm in the context of the story of Jacob. I've mentioned that we have all these old bulletins with the pre-printed covers, and I've been using the Bible verses on the covers as the jumping-off point for Sunday worship, so I found it interesting to hear them both together.

In Genesis 28 we catch up with Jacob as he flees the anger of his brother Esau, whom he'd tricked out of his birthright. Their father Isaac made good on his promise to bestow blessing upon Jacob, the younger of the twin brothers. Jacob received word that his brother planned to kill him after their father's death. With their mother's help, Jacob flees toward Haran, the land of Rebekah's (and Abraham's) people.

While on his journey, Jacob stops to sleep at the end of the day. As he sleeps, he dreams. In his dream, Jacob meets God -- the Lord of Abraham and Isaac -- descending a ladder from heaven.

Jacob is no saint. He's done wrong. He knows it. The price he pays is estrangement from his brother and exile from his home and family. Neither are we

saints. We do wrong. We make mistakes. We know it. Sometimes we think we want to run and hide. We'd rather exit the scene than face our consequences. But when we're found, we may experience relief from the stress of trying to hide.

When Jacob had his dream, he recognized that "surely the Lord is in this place" (Genesis 28:16). Considering what had previously taken place in Jacob's life, he could easily have believed that he was about to feel the wrath of God. He had been running, and now he was lying down. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 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." There are moments in our lives when there is no place to run and hide. It does not do any good to try to talk our way out of the situation. "Even before the word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

Jacob realized there was no escape from the God who had found him. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." From a human perspective, such a moment, when we are stripped naked and totally vulnerable, is a fearful moment. Yet, from a spiritual perspective, there is also a freedom to such a moment. Since there is no place to go, one will finally experience the truth. The startling truth that Jacob experienced was that God was not a vengeful God but rather a God of promise and grace.

God repeats the promises made to Jacob's ancestors: your offspring shall be numerous, like the dust of the earth, the sand on the seashore, the stars in the sky, spread and scattered in all directions. All the families of the earth shall be blessed by you and your offspring. This land I shall give to you. I will be with you wherever you go.

Not only do these repeated promises confirm that the bestowal of blessing from Isaac to Jacob was approved by God, they show that God will find Jacob wherever he goes. "O God, you have searched me and known me. 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" (Psalm 139:1-3).

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee your presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

To the psalmist, these words hold comfort and assurance. God's presence with us is constant. God's knowledge of us is vast and deep. God is before us and behind us. God's hand leads us and holds us fast. Our God, the God of the psalmist, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: this God searches us, knows us, and leads us in the way everlasting.

Jacob, too, is astounded by the vast yet immediate presence of God: "Surely God is in this place -- and I did not know it!" (Genesis 28:16). There, in the wilderness, Jacob meets God and receives God's promise. Even as he leaves his home and leaves the land of his father, God remains with him. There's comfort in this knowledge.

Jacob is in need of comfort on this leg of his journey. What he did to swindle his brother out of his birthright, then to later fool his father into giving him a blessing - - Jacob had to know that he had done wrong. In fleeing, he hides from his brother's wrath. In being found by God, he experiences grace.

In Jacob's dream, God stood above the stairway and offered a direct message to Jacob: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying" (v. 13). In these words, God makes clear that the bridge between earth and heaven is strong. The two are not disconnected places. "Earth is not left to its own resources," says biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Heaven "is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. Heaven has to do with earth."

In this passage, Jacob discovers a bridge between two worlds. He senses the presence of God on earth. He believes the promises that God makes to him. And he builds something — he stands a pillar on the ground — to create a lasting sign that the place is Bethel, the house of God.

When I worked in pest control, a long time ago, in another life, the owner of the company I worked for was an orthodox Jew. While I was there, we moved our office and, as we were setting up the office, before we moved in, the Rabbi led us in a ritual to consecrate the new office. It involved nailing a mezuzah to the doorway. For those of you are not familiar with the ritual and the term, a mezuzah is a narrow box which contains specific Bible verses, reminding the people of the house that God is with us in that place. Every house, for orthodox Jews, should have a mezuzah nailed to the doorpost.

Jacob has a dream and realizes that the place in which he slept for the night was a sacred place and "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" ¹⁷ But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

It is a reminder to us, with Psalm 139, that wherever we may be is a sacred place for "surely the LORD is in this place." There is nowhere we can go, nowhere we might be, that God is not always present offering the grace of God's presence and love.

The place where Jacob stopped was called Luz, but he renamed it Bethel. Bethel is "beth," and "El," God. House of God. Think about your "house of God." It's probably this church, but could and should be, any church, whether yours is patterned after the simplicity of the old Dunker Meetinghouse, a house church, the Little Brown Church in the Vale, or a mighty cathedral with vaulting towers — no matter what the style; think of it as the place where heaven and earth meet.

Your "house of God" may and should be where you live; call it your Bethel. Where you work, where you shop, or eat, or camp or visit, God is there, where heaven and earth meet and where God is with us.