



**“Bethel”**

**Scripture – Genesis 28:10-19a**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, July 19, 2020**

When I was about two or three, I saw the pastor of our church coming out of his office before the Sunday service; he was dressed for worship in his black pulpit robe and colorful stole. And I turned to my Mom and said, “Look, Mommy, that’s God!”

Now, there are a couple of things about this story that give me pause: My childhood image of God as a 60-something year old white man, for one. The authority I attributed to the office of Pastor, for another. But those are topics we can unpack another day.

What this story illustrates for me is this: even at a very young age, I expected to meet God at church. I expected to encounter God in our sacred space, in the building where my family gathered with siblings in Christ to worship and to learn and to serve.

Even from our Sunday School days, many of us harbor some understanding of our sacred space as the House of God or — to use the Hebrew: Beth-El.

This idea of the church as the House of God is so strong in the Christian imagination that congregations across denominations and across the world have chosen the name “Bethel.” Out of curiosity, I did a quick Google search for “Bethel Church.” It yielded almost four million results. And no fewer than six of those congregations are close enough to my home that I could reasonably worship with them on a Sunday morning. Yes, we have some sense that the space we set apart as sacred becomes the very house of God.

We expect — or, maybe, we *hope* — to encounter God in our sanctuaries: through music that lifts us toward heaven; at the table, where we get a foretaste of the heavenly banquet; at the font, where we present ourselves and our children for baptism and come away washed in grace; through fellowship that binds us together in Christian love. Yes, God is in this place. And that is good news. It is good news ... Except, of course, when our sanctuaries are off limits. When our pews are empty. When our organ falls silent. When our stained glass windows are only visible from the outside.

When we can’t gather in our sacred space — our Bethel — where do we go to encounter God?

In today’s Scripture reading from Genesis, we hear the story of one man’s encounter with God. Jacob is camping in the wilderness, somewhere between Beer-Sheba and Haran. Now — remember — Jacob is on the run. He isn’t looking for God; he’s only looking to get away from home and his brother’s rage. But Jacob meets God anyway.

It is a story we hear over and over again throughout the Old Testament. When our ancestors in the faith are in crisis (and, usually, when they are traversing barren desert), God comes to them in their exile. It happens to Hagar, after she flees the abuse of her mistress. It happens to Moses, when he is seeking refuge outside of Egypt. It happens to Elijah, after he escapes Jezebel's wrath. And here, it happens to Jacob.

The Lord comes to Jacob in a dream, and offers again the promise God first made to Jacob's grandfather: I shall make of you a great nation, and — in you — all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And, then, God assures Jacob: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

So overcome is he by God's grace, that Jacob takes the stone upon which he had been sleeping and sets up a pillar to the Lord. And he calls the site of this holy encounter "Bethel" — the House of God.

This site, this *Bethel*, is not a place where Jacob has come seeking God. It is not a place he has come for worship. It's just some out-of-the-way spot on the road between Beer-Sheba and Haran, where Jacob happened to be when the sun set for the night. But God is there. "Surely the Lord is in this place," Jacob declares. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

God is there. Because God is not restricted to the sites where we expect to encounter the holy. God is not confined to the places we set apart as sacred. In fact, as we hear in the promise to Jacob, God is with us wherever we go. God *keeps* us wherever we go.

The Psalmist says it best in this prayer to God: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there."

Some find this image of "the inescapable God" overwhelming, uncomfortable even. And I can understand the urge to hold God at arm's length. But I hear the Psalmist's words as a reminder that there is no place beyond the reach of God's love and grace. Yes, the God who formed us in the divine image is with us always. And, because of this, sometimes we stumble upon Bethel when we least expect to encounter God.

I remember a morning walk I took at the Wooded Glen Retreat Center in Indiana. Now, by virtue of the fact that I was at a retreat center, I suppose my eyes and my heart were more open to God's Spirit than they typically are. But, still, I was surprised to encounter the holy on a wooded path that day.

As I came around a bend in the trail, the sun was streaming through the trees — one large, swath of warm light. The sight of it stopped me in my tracks — so unexpected was that stream of light amidst the dense canopy of trees. At that moment, the warmth of the sun felt like a sacrament — a visible sign of invisible grace. I paused to receive this gift. And, that's when I began to notice things: the intricate spider's web that I would surely have plowed through; the mushrooms I would surely have trampled underfoot; the pair of white-tailed deer grazing in the forest ahead. All of a sudden, I was lost in wonder at the intricate beauties of God's creation, and in awe of the One who formed them and me.

Looking back on that moment, I can declare with the same conviction as Jacob: "Surely the Lord [was] in that place" ... On that particular day, that path through the woods was "none other than the house of God ... the gate of heaven." It was Bethel.

I imagine you, also, have stumbled upon Bethel, the House of God. Perhaps it was when you least expected to encounter the holy. Perhaps it was when you most needed to encounter the holy.

I *know* some of you have, because you've shared these experiences with me. Earlier this week, I reached out to our Elders and Deacons to ask for pictures of places they've experienced God's love and grace, places where the veil between heaven and earth grows thin.

I was overwhelmed by the response I received. Our officers sent photos of sites where the Creator's artistry is on display in the majestic splendor of mountains or waves; and of sites where human artistry is on display in the breathtaking beauty wrought by gifted hands. They sent photos of places where opportunities for service bring us face to face with God; and of places where opportunities for respite bring deep peace. They sent photos of holy ground and holy moments that offered a glimpse of the world beyond. The experiences captured in these photographs varied widely, but they all had this in common: At least for a moment, these places all became Bethel — the House of God.

I was overwhelmed by the response, but I probably shouldn't have been. Because God is with us wherever we go. God keeps us wherever we go. Especially when — like Hagar and Moses and Elijah and Jacob — we are in times of crisis. Even when — like these ancestors in the faith— we are exiled from the places we are accustomed to looking for God.

Yes, God keeps us wherever we go — from our backyard gardens to the edges of the earth. In moments when we are surprised by grace, we remember this promise with astonishing clarity and declare as Jacob did: “Surely, the Lord is in this place ... This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Here are some of those places — places where members of our community have stumbled upon Bethel. May they remind you that God is with us. Always.

*You can view a slideshow of these images by watching the July 19, 2020 worship video posted on [YouTube](#).*

### **Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly**

Loving God, we come before you this morning in need, as always, of your presence and your comfort. We come seeking your assurance, your message of hope, and to be reminded of your love for us. And we do so, during difficult days, as we grapple with fear from illness or the possibility of illness; as we come to grips with an increased awareness of, and our responsibility for, the presence of injustice in our land; and as we live with an uncertainty which is unfamiliar and disorienting.

Inspire us, O Lord, to listen intently to the words you would have us hear. Help us to know as the Psalmist wrote, that “thou has searched me and known me! Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.”

Help us to discern, O God, as a core part of who we are, that you are always with us. It is in this knowledge that we are able to lead the lives you would have us live. Lives that are inspired by, and infused with, the living spirit of your Son, Jesus Christ. Lives in which His love is manifest for all to see.

We pray this morning not just for our community of faith, although we surely do that, but also for our city, our country and the world. We pray that by our words, and most of all by our actions, that we will sow hope, that we will work for justice and that we will commit ourselves to make the world a better place – a world that has reason to be more hopeful. Less afraid. More fair. A world more reflective of your truth.

Hear our prayers this morning, O God, those both spoken and unspoken, and grant us the assurance, the peace, and the inspiration only you can provide. This we ask with praise and with gratitude in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us how to live, and taught us how to pray saying...

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**