

The House of God
Genesis 28:10–22
Sunday, July 12, 2026

Let us pray: Your Word has already been spoken, Lord. Help us simply to *hear* it and *understand* it and *live it out*, in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been spending the summer looking at the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Genesis – these three great ancestors of our faith – seeing what they can teach us about living faithfully to the God that scripture refers to as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” What does it mean to call *their* God *our* God? We have seen how God called Abraham to leave his home and go to this far-away land that God promises to give him, and how God promises to give him and his wife Sarah children when they had lost all hope of having children.

We have seen that sometimes Abraham gets it *right* and responds *faithfully*, while sometimes he *doesn't*. Sometimes in his fear, he does things that God *does not* call him to do. He has a son named Ishmael with his wife's servant Hagar. But then when Sarah gets jealous, he sends Hagar and Ishmael away. When he finally *does* have a son with Sarah – Isaac – God tells him to *kill him* and offer him as a burnt offering to the Lord. Which Abraham is totally prepared to do, until God steps in at the last moment and stops him, reaffirming the promise to make a great nation out of Abraham and bless all the people of the world through him.

Last week we saw how Isaac goes on to have his own children, twins named Esau and Jacob, and many of the same problems that marked Abraham's relationship with Ishmael and Isaac get played out all over again with them. They are constantly fighting against one another, striving for their father's blessing. By right, that blessing belongs to Esau, who was technically the firstborn of the twins. But Jacob manages to steal Esau's birthright from him and trick their father Isaac into blessing *him* instead of Esau. So once

again, God's covenant and blessing run through the *younger* son rather than the firstborn, just like it did with Ishmael and Isaac. Esau is so enraged by what Jacob has done that he wants to kill him. So Jacob runs off, out into the wilderness, which is where we find him today.

I have always loved Jacob's story. Maybe it's because, as the younger of two sons, I can identify with him. Maybe it's because he is just so perfectly *imperfect*. He lies, cheats, and steals. He is always tricking people; finding clever ways to get what he wants. He is an absolute *scoundrel*! *And yet...* God's promise runs through him. God *chooses* him. God *uses* him. And if God can use *him*, then God can use *any of us*, right? Jacob shows us that we do not have to be *perfect* in order for God to love us and bless us and use us. We just have to *show up*. And actually, in *this* story, *God* is the one who shows up, when Jacob least expects it. In a dream, in the middle of nowhere, as he is running for his life.

At home, I have a space in the basement that I use for an office. And it's not really an office so much as it is a desk and a chair and some bookcases back in the far corner. There is a curtain that separates it from the rest of the basement, which is basically the kids' area. I have tried to turn it into a space where I can read and write and pray. And one of the things that I have done is to hang some pictures on the walls.

Hanging right above my desk, so that it is directly behind my computer screen, is a painting of this story; Jacob dreaming in the wilderness. If you turn to the back of the bulletin, you'll see it there. It is by a German artist named Sieger Koder. You see Jacob sleeping, with a stone for his pillow. And behind him are the hands of God, with a ladder or staircase going from earth to heaven, and angels that looks like blueish-white flames ascending or descending. It's a very *simple* painting. The *reason* that I have it hanging above my desk so that it is constantly in front of me while I am writing is because it is a reminder to me of what Jacob says when he wakes from his dream. "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!" In this corner of a cold basement with only a small window to let any sunlight in, the Lord is in

this place. So that when I am preparing a sermon or writing anything else, I can remember that I am in the presence of God.

There are certain places where we *expect* God to show up. Churches. Mountaintops. All throughout scripture, God meets people on mountaintops, and when we are out in some grand, majestic natural scenery like a mountaintop, we somehow feel closer to God, more mindful of God as we stand in awe of what God has created. For many people, ancient holy sites like Israel, Rome, or Greece are places where they feel closer to God, more connected to God, as they are in the places where the biblical story played out. There are places where we *expect* God to be present.

But those places are the exception. More often, our lives are lived out in places where we *do not* expect God to be present. Not that God *isn't* present, just that we aren't as mindful of God's presence. Think about the places you go on a daily basis. Your home. How often do you think of God being present in your home? Maybe sometimes, but not *most* of the time, right? The grocery store. Stores like Target or Walmart. A restaurant like Nudy's. A gas station. Work. School. The gym. The doctor's office. The bank. The DMV. I mean, how many of us have ever thought, "I feel God's presence in this DMV?" Most of the places we go to on a daily basis are not places where we *expect* God to be present.

Jacob did not *expect* God to be present. There was nothing special about this place where he stopped running long enough to sleep. He's literally out in the middle of nowhere. He didn't *go there* seeking God. There's nothing there. There's no one there. Just a bunch of dirt and rocks. But it is *there* that God shows up and meets him and blesses him and promises him, "I am *with you* and will *keep you* wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob is made aware of God's presence with him and love for him, not in a sanctuary or on a mountaintop. He comes to this awareness in the middle of nowhere. But he says, "How *awesome* is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And he takes the stone that he had been using for a pillow, sets it up as a monument, and pours oil on top of it. He calls the place *Bethel*, which in Hebrew means, "house of God." There's no *building* or actual *house* there. The *whole place* is the house of God. And it is at Bethel that Jacob becomes the first person in scripture to refer to "my God." Not just God or Lord, but *my God*. Jacob has found a *personal connection to God* at this place. Heaven and earth have met, and there is nothing separating him from God.

For us, heaven and earth have met, not in a *place*, but in the *person* of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the divine glory of heaven came to earth, and there is nothing separating us from God. And that glory, that divine presence did not *leave* when Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples over and over again that he will not abandon them or leave them orphaned or alone, but that the Holy Spirit will come and be their connection to God. He promises to be with them – to be with *us* – always, to the end of the age. Jesus is *still* alive and at work in this world. We just have to *look* for him. We have to be willing to be surprised by his presence.

A few months ago, I told you how I was in the hospital with Vangie Jaggard before she died. I was sitting with her, reading scripture and praying. And at one point I looked around the room, and right across from her bed on this little thermostat or box on the wall, there was a small cartoonish rubber figure of Jesus just sitting there. Dwight and their kids didn't put it there. We have no idea who did or how it got there. But it was a reminder that in that hospital room, in the midst of sadness and death, the Lord was in that place.

Well, on one of the first days of my vacation the other week, I went to the gym at the YMCA with our daughter Emily. As we were leaving, I stopped at the cubby area to get my stuff, and sitting right there in

the cubby next to mine was that same little rubber figure of Jesus. We just kind of stopped and looked at it and laughed, because she had heard the story of it happening with Vangie. And it was a reminder for both of us that even in *this* place, the YMCA gym, the Lord was *in* that place.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a poet who once wrote,

Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware...

She's saying that the *whole earth*, *every* place, is filled with the presence of God, but not everyone *recognizes* it. They just treat it like a normal, everyday place. But when we *do* recognize the presence of God in the common, everyday places of our lives, we take off our shoes as Moses did at the burning bush, and know that place as holy.

There's a movie called *Joe Versus the Volcano* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan that says this a different way. The two of them are on a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean under a star-filled night sky that they are just in *awe* of, and Meg Ryan says, "My father says almost the whole world's asleep. Everybody you know, everybody you see, everybody you talk to. He says only a few people are awake. And they live in a state of constant, total amazement." It's when we awaken to the presence of God in the ordinary everyday places of our lives – or even in the isolated wastelands of life – that the *place* becomes holy, and *our lives* begin to become holy.

A few days after seeing Jesus at the YMCA, we took a day trip to Ocean City, NJ. We were walking along the boardwalk in the evening, and at one point I glanced over and saw the bright red sun setting into the ocean. But then I thought, "That's not right. That's *east*. The sun doesn't set there." And then I realized, "That's the *moon*." It was so big and red and just starting to rise over the ocean. We stopped to

look at it and take pictures. Then I noticed all these other people were starting to run over to the side of the boardwalk to look at it and take pictures. And for a moment, we were all drawn away from the lights and sounds and busyness of the boardwalk, from the stores and arcades and restaurants, and we just stood in awe and wonder, dazzled by God's creation. And the Lord was in that place.

This world can feel so *heavy* with pain and suffering and sadness and problems. Or we can just feel *nothing*; detached and disconnected and numb. But what we have to remember is that surely the Lord is in this place, and we did not know it. The Lord is in *this* place and *that* place and *that* place. The Lord is in this store and this restaurant and this Wawa. The Lord is in that office and classroom. The Lord is in this gym and that bank. The Lord is in that doctor's office and DMV. The Lord is in this house. The Lord is in *them* because the Lord is in *us*, God's Holy Spirit breathed into us, connecting us to God everywhere we go. *Everywhere* can be the house of God because *we* are the house of God, temples of the Holy Spirit, as Paul says.

And maybe the biggest challenge for us is recognizing *that*. Not just that God is in this *place*, but that God is in this *person*. And not just this person you *like* who is *easy* to love, but this person you *do not* like who is *hard* to love. That *they* are children of God, created in the image of God, and God's Spirit dwells in *them* just as it dwells in *us*. This person who we disagree with or has hurt us. It's being able to open ourselves up to that person and give them a chance, so that we might be able to say, "Surely the Lord is in this person, and I did not know it!"

Living a life of faith is about *expecting* God to show up in every place you go and every person you meet. Not just being *surprised* by God's presence but *anticipating* it. *Looking* for it. *Wanting* to discover God's presence in every person and place. God is *already there*. The question is whether we will wake up and realize it. Amen.