
"Getting Down to Earth"
Genesis 28:10-19a

Recently I stumbled onto this prayer, or maybe a fragment of a prayer, by Frederick Buechner, a well-known Presbyterian Minister whose ministry has largely been as a novelist. The prayer resonated with my spirit and I'd like to share it with you now.

“Lord, catch us off guard today. Surprise us with some moment of beauty or pain so that for at least a moment we may be startled into seeing that you are here in all your splendor, always and everywhere, barely hidden, beneath, beyond, within this life we breathe.”¹

The Biblical character du jour this morning is Jacob, a grandson of Abraham and Sarah. A fragment of his story should have a familiar ring to it for you. From Genesis 28:

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder^[a] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him^[b] and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[c] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel.

Remember how aghast everyone was when Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, said he looked out the window of his space capsule but didn't see God? He mustn't have had his antenna up all the way. **"Where could I go to get away from your spirit?"** sang the Psalmist. **"Where could I go to escape your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there."**² Of course! That's where God lives, right? Up there! Kidding or not, I've heard people say, "Hey, pastor, put in a good word for me with the big guy upstairs, will you?"

The Psalm surprises us by going much further than the big guy upstairs. It continues, **"If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!"** Of course, we say. Isn't God everywhere? Yet, if we're honest, there's a nervous murmur under our breath, **"I believe, help my unbelief."**³

Back to Jacob. Although he is the third generation of the family that was heir to the promises of God, he is not on a religious pilgrimage when we meet him in today's story. The name Jacob in

Hebrew literally means "heel" or "heel grabber." and he was.⁴ He tricks his twin brother, Esau, out of his inheritance, then soft-soaps his way into most favored status with his mother.

Fearing Esau's anger, his mother, Rebecca, sends Jacob to Uncle Laban, **"until your brother's anger cools down and he forgets what you have done to him."**⁵ Then she concocts a story for her husband, Isaac, saying that Jacob had to go away so he could find a good "Jewish" girl to marry.

No. This was not a religious pilgrimage! The encounter takes place in an out-of-the-way location, not where you would expect to have a religious experience. It also happened in a dream while he is sleeping--when you're most vulnerable and totally out of control of your life and Jacob was a control freak. Doesn't God work best in our lives when we are vulnerable? Isn't it in weakness that God seems to us to be strongest?⁶

It's a wild dream about a ladder to heaven. How bizarre is that!? It's not even Jacob's ladder. It's God's ladder. It does stretch from earth to heaven, not so Jacob could climb up but so God could climb down. The angels are climbing up and down the ladder, but Jacob stays where he is and the Lord stands beside him and repeats the blessing given to his parents and grandparents before him. This is Jacob's wake up call. **"Surely the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!"**

That's a comforting word if you're hurting or afraid. **"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me..."**--whether you know it or not.⁷ **"When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you."**--whether you know it or not.⁸ **"Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age,"**--whether you know it or not.⁹ **"Nothing,"** proclaims St. Paul, **"will be able to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord."**¹⁰ Nothing--not sin, not infirmity, not warfare, not death--whether you know it or not!

"Surely the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!" Those same words can be a challenge if you think you're getting along quite well with God or you struggle to keep God at arms length! Let's face it. Life is pretty much a matter of how we look at things. How do you read these letters? GODISNOWHERE.

Some will see it as GOD-IS-NO-WHERE. We often live our lives from that perspective--even those who say they believe in God. Many folk who would deny being atheists live as if they were. **"Fools say to themselves, 'There is no God!'"**¹¹ Maybe even more foolish are those who say there is a God and then live their lives as if there wasn't. That's the way Jacob lived his life. He wasn't climbing higher and higher to find God. He was too full of himself. If he believed in God at all, God was tucked away in some heavenly realm.

Others will see GOD-IS-NOW-HERE. Such vision is a gift of God's spirit. That was the discovery Jacob made. The big surprise in his dream was that God was standing beside him at the bottom of the ladder. That is the downward movement of God to which both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures bear witness. An ancient prophet once prayed, **"If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!"**¹² In the fullness of time,¹³ God answered that prayer. **"Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in**

human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.¹⁴

If God climbed down the ladder to meet Jacob that night, why do we always look up for God and seldom look around for God? Why do we hunger to see the miraculous and fail to recognize God in the common routines? Wendell Berry once commented on Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine. "It really is a small miracle," he said. "We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes."¹⁵

One scholar of religion reminds us that "the biblical narrative is that of a God who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven on earth and occupy human hearts."¹⁶ It is as we sung in our opening hymn: *Everywhere that we can be, thou, God, art present there.*¹⁷ Of course. God is everywhere, even on the golf course. I've heard a few folk over the years say, "You know, pastor, I can find God on the golf course as much as I can in your church." To which I've learned to say, "I hope so. But maybe attending worship with God's people will help to make you more aware of God on the golf course."

Father James Martin is a well-known Roman Catholic priest because of his appearances on TV talk shows and as a commentator about events happening in the Vatican. He is a Jesuit, a religious order that seeks to find God in all things. He wasn't especially religious while growing up. He studied business in college and worked in corporate finance for GE before his call to the priesthood. In a recent interview on Public Radio, he tells how God can grab hold of us when and where we least expect it.

God met me in an apartment in Stamford, Connecticut watching TV. I wasn't praying in church before a statue of Mary, saying, "Please make me a priest." I was tired at the end of the day, a terrible day, had just finished a bowl of spaghetti that I'd heated up, and I was watching PBS. And that's where God met me. Because that's where I was. And so that's where we need to meet people: where they are. That's where Jesus met people. He meets everybody where they are. And that should be our model too.¹⁸

I can relate to that. As a freshman in college at what was then the University of Buffalo, I signed on as an engineering student, but I was essentially clueless. One day in the chemistry lab I had all the apparatus set up for an experiment — the test tubes, the flask, the rubber tubing and the Bunsen burner, the whole 9 yards. The guy next to me was a buddy from high school and he was much better suited for such a pursuit, so in my bewilderment I asked, "Ken, what's in the empty flask?" He stood silently as he stared at me. Finally he said, "Bill, do you know what you just said? You asked what's in the *empty* flask!" Think about that folks! You'll have to listen carefully! That was my wake up call telling me I was headed in the wrong direction.

It really is the little and seemingly insignificant happenings that God often uses to redirect our lives. To look only to the mountain top experiences as places to experience God's presence is to miss that presence in all those common moments. One day Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mount of Transfiguration where they had a vision of who Jesus was in a way that was overwhelming. That experience so captured them that they wanted to hang on to the moment forever, but Jesus was more interested in going back down the mountain to resume his ministry of teaching and healing.

God's love is very down to earth. That's why the prophets were so focused on justice. That's why Jesus said that we serve him best when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. So much of Christianity is so oriented to getting out of this world that we almost forget God created this world, said it was good and loved the world so much that God said the only Son so that we might learn how to live in it fully and completely. Mention the *Kingdom of God* and folk immediately think of heaven when in reality the *Kingdom of God* is what life would be like on earth if we allowed God to rule. One theologian likes to say, "Heaven's in great shape. Earth is where the problems are." That's why we pray, **"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."**

Some would say that life on earth is only the dress rehearsal for the next life, but doesn't that cheapen the good world that God has made? Yet I don't know many who can't wait to move on from this life to the next. Most want to stay here as long as possible with an important caveat, that they be in good health. Florida is not heaven's waiting room. Florida is like any other place on earth where we are called to live life fully by loving God and by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Waking up from his dream where he was left standing at the bottom of a ladder, Jacob declares, **"Surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it."** God's love is very down to earth, whether we know it or not.

In commenting about the dreams and visions of a new heaven and a new earth in the prophet Isaiah, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

While Isaiah might have agreed that salvation comes from heaven, I doubt he would ever have agreed to leave it there. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, heaven is only interesting insofar as it comes to earth. Salvation is not about earthlings going up but about heaven coming down, and any notion of salvation that doesn't include just rulers, honest judges, an equitable economy, and peace among the nations, would have made Isaiah scratch his head.

Or in the words of Ziggy: "The idea of looking for heaven doesn't have to be over our heads...sometimes it's right under our very nose!"



- 1 From "The Hungering Dark"
- 2 Psalm 139:7-8a
- 3 Mark 9:24
- 4 Genesis 25:26
- 5 Genesis 27:44-45
- 6 See 1 Corinthians 12:10
- 7 Psalm 23
- 8 Isaiah 43:2
- 9 Matthew 28:20
- 10 Romans 8:39
- 11 Psalm 14:1, *Good News Bible*
- 12 Isaiah 64:1, *Common English Bible*
- 13 See Galatians 4:4
- 14 Philippians 2
- 15 Source unknown
- 16 Bass, Diana Butler. *Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution* (p. 13).
HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- 17 *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*, Hymn #32, Glory to God
- 18 Interviewed by Krista Tippet, *On Being*, NPR, December 17, 2016