

FROM THE PAST WILL COME OUR FUTURE

Order of Service (bulletin)

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July 19, 2026

Pentecost 8

Genesis 28:10-19

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there. He took a rock and used it for a headrest and lay down to sleep there. During the night he had a dream: there was a ladder, standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven; and messengers of God were going up and coming down the ladder. [Adonai] was there, standing over him, saying, “I am [Adonai], the God of Sarah and Abraham, and the God of Rebecca and Isaac. Your descendants will be like the specks of dust on the ground; you will spread to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, and all the tribes of the earth will bless themselves by you and your descendants. Know that I am with you. I will keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; I will not desert you before I have done all that I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke and said, “Truly, [Adonai] is in this place, and I never knew it!” He was filled with trembling and said, “How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!” Jacob rose early the next morning, and took the stone he had used as a headrest and set it up as a monument, and anointed it with oil. Jacob named the place Bethel – “House of God” – though before that, the town was called Luz.

Psalms 139:1-12, 23-24

[Adonai], you’ve searched me, and you know me. You know if I am standing or sitting, you are intimate with all of my ways. Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching, you are intimate with all of my ways. A word is not even on my tongue, [Adonai], before you know what it is: you hem me in, before and behind, shielding me with your hand. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, a height my mind cannot reach! Where could I run from your Spirit? Where could I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you’re there; if I make my bed in Death, you’re already there. I could fly away with wings made of dawn, or make my home on the far side of the sea, but even there your hand will guide me, your mighty hand holding me fast. If I say, The darkness will hide me, and night will be my only light, even darkness won’t be dark to you; the night will shine like the day – darkness and light are the same to you. ... Examine me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts – see if there is misdeed within me, and guide me in the way that is eternal.



It's not unusual for the revised common lectionary to (especially in the summer) go through some of the longer continuous stories within the Old Testament readings. And so this week's reading about Jacob at Bethel follows directly on last week's reading that you may have heard or seen on YouTube when we were in the park. We read from Genesis 25 and we heard about Esau - for the cost of a bowl of soup - selling his legitimate firstborn

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inheritance rights to his slightly younger twin brother Jacob. And I briefly mentioned that it all became official years later when Jacob took advantage of his father's poor eyesight to be able to receive Isaac's blessing as the heir. That happened between last week's reading and this week's reading. You see, Isaac asked Esau, the older son, who was a great hunter, to go and catch some fresh game and to prepare a tasty meal for them. And at that meal, Isaac would give the oldest son his blessing. But while Esau was out hunting, Jacob and his mother cooked a meal just the way Isaac likes it. They dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes so that he would smell like his brother. They put animal fur on his chest and on his arms so that he would feel like his brother who was quite hairy apparently. And so Jacob tricks his father and gets the blessing before Esau even comes back. And even after Isaac figured out the deceit that had happened, he basically said, "It's well, it's too late now. What can I do?"

Esau was not happy. In fact, Esau made it quite well known that he planned to kill his younger brother. Now, he did say he was going to wait until after his father had died and the ceremonial time of mourning had ended. For some reason, Esau told his mother of his plot. Of course, Rebecca warned her favorite son, Jacob, about what his brother was going to do and encouraged the younger son to go stay with her brother until Esau got over his anger.

And that's where we pick up the story today. Jacob is making his way from Beersheba, where Isaac's family lived, to Haran, where uncle Laban lived. Haran was actually where Isaac and Rebecca met and married. That was part way along the journey of Abraham had taken with his father from down near the Gulf all the way up to the city of Haran near the source waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. And it was where Abraham felt a call himself to journey on to Canaan with the promise that he would be the great parent, great descendant of a vast nation. So here's young Jacob going back to the place that his grandfather had left.

I wonder what was going through Jacob's head. You know, all of those tricks, all of that deceit, so he could secure the primary inheritance. But here he is... having got it and he can't enjoy it because he's on the run for his life. *How could this happen?* he must be thinking to himself. *How can I fulfill the promise that God made to my grandfather? How could Abraham be blessed with these descendants if I am not able to live in the land that Abraham had journeyed to?*

This all might have been on his mind when he camped one night near Luz and he had that dream: angels moving between heaven and earth and God with the angels even talking to Jacob. *I am the God of your grandparents. I am the God of your parents.* And then in language that echoes what God had said to Abraham. God had told Abraham, *you would have descendants like stars in the sky.* And here to the grandson, God says, *Your descendants will be as numerous as specks of dust on the earth.* New promise for Jacob here. *Know that I am with you. Know that I'm going to keep you safe wherever you go. And know that you will come back to this land...* that the promise will be fulfilled. *I was with your family before you were born. I am with you here in Luz and I am going to be with you wherever you go.* The psalm writer believed the same thing and put it this way... *You know all of my ways intimately. Where can I run from your spirit? Where can I go to get away from your presence? Because everywhere I go, everywhere that I could ever go, you're there.*

I imagine that this rushed journey for Jacob from Beersheba to Haran was one of the only times that Jacob was truly alone. The text in Genesis makes it really clear that Jacob was his mother's favorite and he tended to hang out around camp rather than going out on his own for hunting or maybe tending livestock in distant fields where he would have more alone time. And so I imagine that Jacob got a lot of positive reinforcement about what a good boy he is. And it's just a guess, but I'm thinking Jacob might have had a pretty huge ego. I mean, you had to if he was going to do all of the things that were necessary to secure that benefit that culturally

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wasn't something that belonged to him. And I can imagine Jacob saying: *but I want it. I deserve it.* And Rebecca was no help because... *Yes, you do, my little ookie-pookie. You're such a good boy.*

So fear of his brother was definitely the motivating emotion that led Jacob to make this trip. But I wonder if Jacob was prepared for the loneliness that he was going to experience on that journey.

Loneliness is a very difficult state of mind to be in. I mean, even the most introverted of us who appreciate being alone from time to time know that loneliness is different. That being alone is not the same thing as being lonely.

Perhaps loneliness hits us so hard because God's creation just seems to be based on relationship. Our interaction with each other just seems to be part of God's plan. I mean, we see it in the observation of the smallest and the biggest parts of our universe. It's all about attraction. It's all about interaction. Even in the mythical, symbolic creation stories at the beginning of our Bibles, creation is based on relationship. Genesis 1 that that wonderful poetic story of the creation of different parts of the world and God resting on day seven. The sky is created but then there are the birds that are in relation to the sky. The water is created and separated and there are fish in relation to the water. The land is brought up to separate waters and animals and plants populate that land, even the human animal. When it comes to describing humanity being created it is described as a relational creation in God's image. Humans (plural) were created male and female: relational language. Genesis 2 is a different way of describing the origins of things, but it starts out, basically, with God seeking a suitable companion for the first proto-human. It's all about relationship.

We are made to be in relationship and loneliness is our reaction to this created need for companionship being out of whack, being out of balance. And even though Jacob made his own rocky loneliness bed and he was being forced to lie in it, it must have been very hard and maybe even doubly so because I expect he had very little experience outside of supportive relationships. And I'm sure that most of us can relate to that. I mean even in our relationships when we have an estrangement and even when that estrangement might make sense as the most healthy and best option in the moment, we can still feel a regret for the loneliness.

In his uncomfortable loneliness, Jacob camped alone with only a lonely rock for a pillow. And then he dreamed that he was not alone. He had what the Celts call a *thin place experience*. A time when this realm and the realm of the divine seems extremely close that they're almost touching... a place where, through sometimes disciplined conscious spiritual work, someone might find themselves there – or sometimes just by fully letting go (like Jacob did in a a time of dream) and sometimes thin places just appear out of nowhere without any planning without any effort on our part... times when we can bridge the gap and the holy can seem uniquely close.

I am with you. It's a promise of faith. We're not alone. We live in God's world where God is creating as created. where God is making new and reconciling, where God is working in others and us even in our most human moments of isolation and loneliness. That's that promise. God is with us. I am with you.

Jacob had this epiphany that Luz was a thin place for him and he called it Bethel: house of God. He even created a small cairn monument. But my experience is that any place - in fact every place - can be and is a thin place, Jacob needed to let his mind wander, let his soul open up to notice how close his God was. And an experience like Jacob's can be incredibly rare. It's very hard to force. Jacob just let himself drift into sleep and he discovered he was there with God. But I think those subtle, mysterious, thin place moments are equally as meaningful where we just— even for a millisecond —kind of say, "I feel the divine."

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We are people of promise. We are people of covenant. And the scripture record tells us over and over and over again that our God is with us, that our God knows us, that our God supports us and upholds us even in our loneliest times. Jacob thought he was completely by himself as he ran away from his past. But he discovered in that thin place that God was and is and will be with him from the past into and through his future. *I was with you in Beersheva.* God tells him *I am with you here at Bethel and I'm going to be with you in Haran and in all the time beyond.*

May we be open to the sacred thinness that is all around us. And may we know that we are not alone. Amen.

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