# Genesis 28:10-19

**10**Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. **11**When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. **12**He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13**There above it stood the Lord, and he said: “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. **14**Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. **15**I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

**16**When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” **17**He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

**18**Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. **19**He called that place Bethel, [meaning House of God] though the city used to be called Luz.

# Romans 8:18-25

**18**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19**For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20**For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21**that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

**22**We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **23**Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. **24**For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? **25**But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

“Searched and Known on Holy Ground”

The Rev. Lisa Durkee

July 23, 2023

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” I had been reading through this morning’s scripture lessons one morning at my family’s cottage, stopping to look at and to photograph the morning’s spectacular sunrise, and wondering how many I have missed because of doing that silly thing called sleeping. Or just because I didn’t slow down long enough to look closely.

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” Jacob catches himself, fresh from the fog of sleep, and knows God’s presence with him because of a dream. He makes an altar from his pillow of stone, and starts his day in worship. We are told that he is afraid, and no wonder. God, who created him, has made him nighttime promises of greatness—and also told him God will be with him always; God will watch over him wherever he goes. Jacob is afraid. Maybe because God is powerful, and maybe because the idea of God watching over him is a bit unnerving. Do you suppose Jacob wonders what God knows about his past deeds, as well as his future greatness?

You know I am always up to share with you a good read. Well, the book of *Genesis* is a wonderful epic novel, you know. It is made up of characters whose lives are full of as much intrigue as any James Patterson novel, with the themes of betrayal, deception, rape and murder, as well as loyalty, fidelity, creativity and love. Jacob is a character whose very name translates “he grasps the heel,” which has become a Hebrew idiom for “he deceives.” That’s Jacob. A twin who was born holding onto his brother Esau’s heel, he grew into a man so intent on fortune that he was willing to deceive his father after already beguiling his brother. No, Jacob has not always been a man whose actions were defined by his just and honest response to God’s blessings. This moment in his life, though, is a turning point for Jacob. Perhaps this moment might be a turning point for us, as well? Do you ever wonder what God would think of your inmost thoughts?

As a child, I can remember imagining that my teacher knew what I was thinking when I was bored and not paying close attention to what she had to say. I wondered the same when I was frustrated with my mother, when my brother Adam didn’t have to do the same chores that my sister Kim and I did. I knew that unpleasant thoughts weren’t, well, pleasant, and didn’t like to imagine that anyone had access to my innermost wonderings. I’m sure you don’t need to wonder that learning that God was with me at all times—knowing my inmost being—wasn’t always the sweet assurance that I know it to be now. Have you ever worried that God might judge your inmost thoughts or feelings? Still, I have learned to pray the same words that once caused me some concern. “**23**Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. **24**See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Yes, the assurance that Jacob learned in his sleep, we can learn in our waking hours, trusting that God, who knit us together in our mother’s womb, also desires for us everlasting life. Still, we don’t always live a life worthy of praise, and we wonder if God’s promises to us are true. We stumble over our opportunities, and we are blind not only to the beauty of what is right in front of us, but also are blind to the needs of others. As we look forward toward everlasting light in hope of God’s promises, we don’t walk alone. Yes, we have God with us, but for those whose lives are not blessed with a smooth path, the only goodness they will know is what we share. It can start very simply. We can share our good humor. We can smile when our inmost thoughts might have us grimace. Practice—it gets easier. We can offer a helping hand in place of averted eyes when we see homeless in our woods or in the streets of the city. We can be company for those who are lonely. We help in this way on Wednesday mornings, when people from communities around the peninsula gather for coffee and treats provided by Healthy Peninsula. I always look forward to seeing the now familiar faces of our guests. I also look forward to our conversations beginning after worship today, to know how we will best invest in our community and its good social health. The people God would have us be, the person that Jacob became for the tribes of Israel, may be a lofty goal, but it starts simply enough. I like to quote one of my favorite authors, George Eliot, who said that it is never too late to become the person you were meant to be.

We can be grateful that the apostle Paul didn’t remain as he was. He, who persecuted the early church, became one on whose words we rest for comfort and for guidance. You think we have it hard, trying to be the church in the 21st century, when the secular world around us calls us to be other than God would have us be? In a culture of rugged individualism, in which we are too often encouraged to define our lives by what we have, rather than by who we are, we can be challenged to goodness by our earliest Christian forbears. The Roman Empire and its oppressive authority would have squelched any hope of a brighter, more hopeful future for Jesus’ early followers. Fighting for their very survival against the threat of death, those who listened to Paul’s words needed the reminder that they are saved by Christ. This life is not the end, nor are our current frustrations and suffering any measure of what we are offered.

We may lean on Paul’s reminder that there is a difference between expectation and hope. We hope for what we have not seen. This, our faith, leads us to greater peace, trusting that God has in control what is out of control for us. We hope that God’s watching over us at all times and in all places means that we can relax and enjoy the ride. We wait for the redemption of our bodies, even while we work to align our souls with God’s will. And it is work, isn’t it? Our first instincts sure don’t look like God’s first fruits, do they? There are times that we really need to examine what we would say and do more closely than what our first instincts would allow. We need to remember that we are standing on holy ground—at all times. Created by God who also created us, this earth and this life of ours is sacred, but we are too often unmindful of its sacred quality. Throughout my vacation, I had running through my head a kind of litany of repetition of the first several lines of one of my favorite sonnets of William Wordsworth, the British Romantic poet. He writes, “The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not.”

What might move us closer to God? What might move us to pay attention to God’s gifts, and move to be the persons God means us to be? God knows our inmost being, and our uttermost potential. God wants us to know our own holiness, grown closer to the sacred world we are given, and the Holy God who calls us. May it be so for us.