I was reared in the house of God. The church I grew up in was called Bethel—Bethel Evangelical Free Church. It was a small congregation in the Eltingville neighborhood of Staten Island, New York. A certain place, you might say, but by most accounts, no place special. Still, I met God in that place, and it became Bethel to me, the house of God.

Surely the Lord is in this place, Jacob said, and I did not know it. Why didn’t he know it? Same reason we don’t know it today, even though we live now on the other side of the so-called Enlightenment, where every place seems to be no place special. Our world today has become disenchanted compared to the way ancient people thought of things. But even in this ancient story, it’s clear that people are people, no matter when they live. And it’s easy to think we’re out there on our own, moving about in uncertain places.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote a poem to remind himself of how to be a poet. It’s titled, How to Be a Poet. Poetic, don’t you know?! He talks about being quiet and paying attention to the silence. About letting the world speak. Then he says this: Stay away from anything/that obscures the place it is in./There are no unsacred places;/there are only sacred places/and desecrated places.¹

Jacob is in transition from one place to another. He is running away from Esau after stealing his brother’s birthright and his father’s blessing. He’s a fugitive, trying to manage his own safety. He finds out he can run from Esau but not from himself and not from God. Anywhere you go, you are there and God is there. There are no unsacred places.

You may relate to Jacob in this story in ways only you know. Maybe you are running from something or someone and you are wondering whether you can ever be safe. Maybe you are like

¹ https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/41087/how-to-be-a-poet
all the rest of us right now, between places. You feel like you are nowhere in particular. You can’t go back to familiar places like work or school or church because you aren’t sure they are safe for you. Everywhere you think to go, COVID-19 threatens. You feel alone. And though you try to be brave in your wakeful moments, when you sleep—if you do—you feel all the more terrified because you are out of control.

Jacob comes to this certain place that is nowhere in particular. He sleeps. He dreams. And when he does, he sees and hears things that change him.

Most of the time, we think our wakeful world, the everyday world where we can make decisions and manage our own lives, is the safe place for us. We fear that if we sleep, we will confront the God who will see us as we really are and judge us harshly. But where’s the gospel in that? What’s good news about the idea that when you feel that God really sees you as you are, that will be the end of you. What if it’s just the beginning of you? What if God is the one who sees beneath your sin and your fear to the you who is loved and cherished and held firmly in everlasting arms just as you are?

Jacob sees a ladder. Jacob’s ladder. That’s what we’ve always called it.

My dad was a ship pilot in New York Harbor. When he would board a big ship from the pilot boat or get off it—ascending or descending, he would climb or drop down what is called a Jacob’s ladder. It’s a rope ladder hanging off the side of a ship. I can imagine my father thinking about this story time and time again as he did his ordinary work. There are no unsacred places.

But it was probably a ramp Jacob saw. A Mesopotamian ziggurat. An earthen mountain with steps carved into it on a plain that made it look like, well, a stairway to heaven. (Apologies to Led Zeppelin.) The ancients thought of these structures as the gates of heaven.

Jacob might have thought he had stumbled upon a sacred place, but I think something truer was being discovered there. He found out that God could find him anywhere. Wherever he would go, God could reach him. Heaven touches the earth everywhere. And angels are trafficking the
road to you wherever you are and wherever you go.

The most powerful moment in Jacob's dream though is when the Lord appears to him personally and speaks to him directly. What does God say? Three things important for our notice: I am with you; I will protect you; and I will bring you home.

The first thing is presence. What we need most in this life, wherever we are is the assurance that we are not alone. God is with us. God goes with us.

Where is God is a question we ask especially when life is falling apart. And right now, some of you are feeling vulnerable in ways you haven't in a while. You may be afraid of catching the coronavirus that is a scourge on the planet and an ever-present threat to the life and health of every single one of us. You may have lost your job or about to be forced to go back to work before you feel safe. Teachers, I'm thinking about you right now. You may be feeling alone in your house because you are living alone or even just with your family. You are not alone, though. God is with you in this in-between place and time.

But more than that, God will protect you. I will keep you, God says. The Lord is our keeper is a constant refrain in the Bible.

Now, I can’t promise that if you go out in public without a mask, you won’t get COVID-19. That would be a misappropriation of a biblical promise.

This week, a Texas man in his 30s died of the virus. Dr. Jane Appleby, chief medical officer at San Antonio’s Methodist Hospital, says she’s been hearing about COVID-19 parties, which young people allegedly attend to see who gets infected first or who can survive the virus.

“Someone will be diagnosed with the disease, and they’ll have a party to invite their friends over to see if they can beat [it].” One young man just died after attending one of these parties.

“One of the things that was heart-wrenching that he said to his nurse was, ‘You know, I think I made a mistake.’ And this young man went to a COVID party,” she said. “He didn’t really believe. He thought the disease was a hoax. He thought he was young and invincible and wouldn’t get affected by the
Some churches don’t believe either. They have either bought into the notion that all of this is politically designed to undermine the current administration or that God will protect them if they show how much they believe in God’s promises rather than science. But facts are stubborn. Truth isn’t political. And faith is not foolish.

What God promises is to defend us against any threat to God’s promises. What God intends to do in and through us will not be thwarted by what is beyond us. But we ourselves can undermine the promises of God by tempting, instead of cooperating with, God. Our security is in trusting that God keeps us. Jesus knew that, but he wouldn’t try to prove it by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple when the devil taunted him, claiming God would send the angels to catch him. And we shouldn’t ask more of God’s keeping than Jesus did.

Finally, God will bring you home. In Jacob’s case that meant God would return him from his exile. Israel would remember that again when they were in exile in Egypt and in Babylon and even when they had lost their homeland in Palestine and were spread throughout the world feeling homeless in the diaspora.

For us, that might mean a promise to bring us back to a world that feels again like home to us. With each other. With God. In the house of God. Here in the church called Wilshire.

It may mean for you that God will bring you home to yourself. Wendell Berry again: ... the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.

That feeling of estrangement from yourself will end. You will know the healing in your heart or mind or emotions that has kept you from feeling fully yourself. The sense of place called home is a wholeness God

---


promises. God will not rest until you find yourself at home.

When Jacob awoke, he built an altar of stone and anointed it. He gave a tithe to maintain it. He had the sense that he should answer God’s promises with his faithfulness.

My father found the Lord among the people of the Bethel Free Church. He actually helped to build the church I grew up in. Brick by brick. I remember going to the job site and carrying bricks and mortar to him as he and others built the church. The house of God. Bethel.

I found God there, too. And I have been trying with you to build God’s house in this place—paying my tithes, seeing to it that what once was just a place like any other place would be known as a holy place, a sacred place. Bethel. The house of God.

Many of you have found God here or God has found you. It’s been like a dream. You sense that God is with you, that God will keep you, and that God will bring you home. Now, how will you respond to these blessings? Amen.