

“The Practice of Seeing: Vision”

Psalm 84:1-4, 12

Genesis 28:10-19a

June 5, 2016

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As we turn to our second lesson, a quick reminder of the backstory. Jacob and Esau were fraternal twins. As the older twin, Esau was due to gain both his family's inheritance and the blessing of God to carry on the covenantal line. It was supposed to go from Abraham to Isaac, and from Isaac to Esau. But ... but Jacob – with the help of his mother – tricked his blind father. He slapped on animal skin to make him feel like his hairy brother; he dressed up in Esau's clothes – the whole nine yards. And Isaac blessed Jacob, handing on the sacred inheritance to him. Needless to say, Esau was ready to kill Jacob. So their mother helped Jacob run away from home, run to the safety of his uncle's home in Haran. We pick up our story there – when Jacob's on the run.

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. 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. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him 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; 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 in you and in your offspring. 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.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ 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.’

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. He called that place Bethel [which means, “the house of God”].

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Jacob met the Lord when he was on the run, in a place in the middle of nowhere that he named Bethel, “the house of God.” And it makes me wonder: where do we meet God today? Or do we meet God anymore? Is God’s house anywhere at all?

We often speak of our church as “the house of God,” and for many of us, that is not just a saying. We’ve met God right here in this place we call our church home. I’ll never forget when my seminary classmate Rick Spalding visited here. Rick spent his young childhood here in Lake Forest, and

worshiped here every week until they moved away when he was eight years old. When he came to visit me, the first thing he wanted to see was the sanctuary. As soon as we walked in the back doors, his eyes filled with tears: “That picture,” he said, pointing to the Resurrection window. “That picture of Jesus is the first place I learned that God loves me ... that I am welcomed home.” It’s not merely the beauty of the stained glass window. It’s what happened here that made him feel that he truly belonged.

I wonder ... have you ever met God here, here in this place we call God’s house? I have - and my guess is that many of you have too. When the choir sings a heart-stopping anthem, you *know* that God is at home, here in God’s house. When we share joys and concerns, and send off our kids to Work Trip, or pray for one of our loved ones with cancer, or rejoice at the birth of a grandchild, or weep with our friends in Syria – when we share joys and concerns, we *feel* that God is at home, right here, surrounding us with family to share our joy and pain. When the Word of God shakes us to our core, and wakes us up to see the possibility of the kingdom right in the midst of us, and we know we’ll go our differently than when we came into this place, we are *sure* God’s in this place, even if we did not know it. “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise,” writes the Psalmist, and we are blessed, so blessed, to know how true it is.

But what Jacob discovered ... what Jacob discovered in his dream along the roadside ... is that a house of worship isn’t the only dwelling place God has. I don’t just mean other churches – though they are, of course, God’s

houses too. What I mean is bigger than that. As the Psalm we read together also says, “Even the sparrow finds a home, and a swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at your altars, O Lord.” God’s house isn’t just indoors, in rooms set aside for God. In fact, God cannot be contained. Isn’t that what Jacob discovered? That the whole world is God’s house?

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” the Psalmist writes. And who are we to ignore it?

Now, I recognize that this may be the most dangerous sermon I’ve ever preached in my life: telling you that you can find God in nature! Whatever am I *thinking*? Plenty of people – maybe you yourself, right now – would just as soon be at the beach or on the golf course, rather than sit here in these rigid pews. Plenty of you would love to be meeting God on the terrace with a mimosa in your hand, or walking in the woods at Open Lands – and I can’t say I blame you.

But here’s what I propose – I propose a radical idea, that it isn’t an either-or choice. We don’t *either* find God here, *or* find God in nature. We don’t *either* experience God in church, *or* experience God’s presence in the outside world. The house of God? It isn’t *either-or*. Instead, it’s *both-and*. We find God here ... *and* we meet God in nature. We meet God here in this holy place ... *and* we experience God in the glory of the world. Why do I think that’s the case? Because God can’t be contained - for God has made his home in *every* place.

This isn't New Age, post-Christendom, secular-culture, happy-clappy secularism. 500 years ago, John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian Church, said, "The skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible,"ⁱ and "Even the most common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art"ⁱⁱ Or as Jesus once said, "Those who have eyes to see – let them see."

So today, let me not just give you permission – let me *beg* you to look for God in the everyday glory of this world God made.

So let me ask you again: where *have* you met God? Where have you met God, out there, in the world, as Jacob did so very long ago?

For me, there are holy places indeed. I have felt in the awe-some presence of God at Multnomah Falls in Oregon, where the waters cascade in layer after layer on the side of the mountain, the smell of pine needles blanketing the ground, the sound of water splashing and rushing, the power of life unstoppable. This is the house of God. And I have felt the steady presence of God at the Oceanside, where the strength of the waves lap over the sand, rushing in, and rushing out, rushing in, and rushing out, echoing the reliable presence of the Lord: this is the house of God. And I have felt the tender hand of God in the wave of the grasses at Ft. Sheridan, or in the Open Lands that spread across Lake Forest, where birds' voices sing a chorus of chattering hopefulness, and tiny flowers dot the prairie with their color. There is no

Monet or Van Gogh that can even do justice to the beauty of these places; this is the house of God.

Where do you meet God in the world, as Jacob did so very long ago?

This isn't sacrilegious; it is faithful. For Jacob is hardly the only one in Scripture who discovers this: that the world is God's own home. In the Bible, Barbara Brown Taylor points out,

“People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air”

In fact, we do God an injustice when we separate God from the world's great beauty, instead of leaning in to beauty and allowing it to point us to the Lord our God.

John Calvin, living in Geneva, Switzerland, in the shadows of the Alps, with the glory of the lake in front of him, knew this to be true. He once wrote these wise words:

“There is nothing more preposterous than to enjoy the very remarkable gifts that attest the divine nature ... yet to overlook the Author who gives them to us.”

So this is what I boldly urge you to do. Stop ... and open your eyes to the beauty of nature, and for those who can no longer see, then open your ears,

and open your hands. Stop ... and drink in the beauty. Notice the colors. Feel the water. Hear the birds' songs, the lap of the water at the beach. Stop ... stop to take it all in ... and then follow your heart to the author of this glory. Open your heart to the one who gave us all this for our pleasure. Oh taste and see how gracious the Lord is.

The African-American botanist George Washington Carver – a brilliant scientist - once said it this way: “Reading about nature is fine, but if a person walks in the woods and listens carefully, he can learn more than what is in books, for they speak with the voice of God.”

ⁱ John Calvin, 1.5.1

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, 1.5.2