"God is Here"
Genesis 28:10-19

Coming across a monk who was praying while walking around a holy building, a great teacher said, "How pleasant it is to walk around sacred places, but you know, it's far better to practice the faith." The monk took his words to heart and began earnestly studying the scriptures. One day the great teacher came across him and commented, "How commendable it is to study the scriptures, but you know, it is far better to practice the faith." The monk took his words to heart and took up intensive meditation. One day the great teacher came across him and said, "How blissful it is to be lost in meditation and prayer, but you know, it's far better to practice the faith." The monk was completely confounded. In desperation he begged, "Teacher, teach me what to do." The great teacher smiled and replied, "Just stop grasping at things."

This was the lesson for Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. From the day he was born Jacob was someone who held on to life tightly. His name meant literally heel grabber because when he was born, he grabbed the heel of his twin brother Esau who got out of the womb first. He thought that he had to come up with answers on his own. He had to pull himself up by his bootstraps. That was the pattern of his life. He cheated his brother out of his birthright. The birthright included not only the traditional biblical birthright, which granted superior rank in the family (Genesis 49:3), a double portion of the paternal inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17), and the priestly office in the family (Numbers 8:17-19), but also the Abrahamic blessing as well, which promised that his descendants would be a source of blessing for all the nations of the earth. Jacob also tricked his father to give him the blessing that belonged to Esau. It was believed at the time that a father only had one blessing to give and once that was given, it was gone. Jacob figured that he had to get all things done the hard way. He felt that he needed to fend for himself because he was on his own. And to prove this to him more and more, according to this passage Jacob finds himself in an unfamiliar place, alone, fleeing for his life, and not having enough resources to seek the wife he wants. His brother Esau was going to kill him, so Jacob's prospects were not very good. While on the run, he reached this place where he had to stop and sleep because it was getting dark. Jacob lied down at night to sleep. Yet, In the midst of alienation, danger, self-exile, isolation and unfamiliar location, he encountered God. His flight and self-exile are reframed as places of new possibilities. He dreams of a ladder and God's presence. God graciously appears to him and surprisingly God renews to the fugitive Jacob the promises made previously to Abraham to provide land and ancestors.

So what happened here? Did God approve of Jacob's trickery and cheating behaviors? Didn't Jacob get what he deserved for cheating his brother and his father? I don't believe that God approved of Jacob's behavior and was giving him a reward and a blessing for it. What I do believe happened as indicated in our scripture is the fact that Jacob was finally open to receive God's help and presence. Jacob was at the lowest point in his life and his ego was finally giving way to the divine presence. Therefore, Jacob was able to notice that God was with him and in fact was with him all along. Contrary to appearances, Jacob was not alone. A dream reveals that his resting place was full of busy angels, or more literally divine "messengers." These beings are purposeful in their ascent and descent on a stepped structure joining earth to heaven. They are on the move doing God's work in the world. Jacob also encounters God at this awesome "gate of heaven." Jacob is surprised to discover that he has been a guest at the "house of God" (Gen. 28:17), which is the literal meaning of the name Bethel (*bet-'el*).
In his book "*New Earth and New Heaven"* Eckhart Tolle writes, "The ego tends to equate having with being: I have therefore I am." Jacob for a long time lived a life of grabbing all that he could. This was the time he would begin to learn that there is more to his life than getting more stuff. Our egos are always telling us that we don't have enough, but the real message is that **"we are not enough."** Our search for more is deeply rooted in our deep sense of not being enough as people. According to Tolle our spiritual journey is to learn to let go of our connection to

possessions or anything for that matter. What really matters in our core is the freedom to be without anything else! What counts in life is to know that we are good enough because we are with God all the time. There is no time when we are away from the presence of God. That is usually the illusion of our egos. Whenever we feel alone, abandoned or needing to grab more in life, we are living and believing in the illusion of being separate from God and others.

Jacob had to learn this the hard way. He had to go on this long and lonesome journey in order to discover that God was with him. Later on Jacob is named Israel which means, “One who has struggled with God,” because he encounters God face to face and even struggles physically with God. So the question is before us today: Where have we seen God but didn’t know it until later? How do we become more aware of God’s presence in each moment of our lives? According to Joseph Driskill, a theologian and teacher, “The God of mainline Protestant churches is the "ground of one's being" who requires ethical behavior, especially at social and political levels, but is not a power with whom one would admit to having an experiential relationship. How could the sovereign God of the cosmos truly care about the mundane matters of daily life? …Prayer, a practice commonly associated with being in relationship with the divine, often remains a child's activity. Adults replace the "now I lay me down to sleep" prayers of childhood with more altruistic requests couched in more sophisticated language, but the petitionary framework of childhood remains largely the same. Other forms of prayer - for example, centering prayer, an examination of conscience - have been virtually unknown to mainline Protestants.”

Unfortunately, many of us have to go and dig deeper into the Christian tradition to learn about these mystical experiences of God. Last week I talked to you about St. Teresa of Avila’s image of the soul as a garden where God plants the seeds and our work is to allow enough water to come into the garden. The water is our prayer which is not entirely our work. So, what is prayer? According to Teresa, it is “Loving attentiveness to God.” What are some forms of prayer that you have experienced? Is it praying before you eat? Is it a duty we have on Sunday? Is it the supplications for things we want from God? St. Teresa talks about the fact that this watering of the soul-garden with prayer may seem simple, but it is often very hard. It is also something that most of us never get to experience in depth. St. Teresa describes four ways the watering can happen:

1. The Well and the Bucket: Meditation- This first way is like hauling the water from a well in a bucket. It is great labor and provides little water. These are practices such as singing, reading scriptures, offering prayers of supplication, etc.
2. The Waterwheel: The Prayer of the Quiet- This second way is by means of a waterwheel, which is less work and gives more water. The soul is now rising above its miseries and is receiving a taste of the delights of glory. “The important thing is not think much, but to love much. Therefore, do whatever most arouses you to love.”
3. The Stream or Spring: This is when the water flows from a nearby stream or spring. God now seems to be doing practically everything regarding prayer, and one no longer clings so much to stillness. People go about their normal activities: reading, writing, and engaging in works of charity and affairs of business. All the while, however, there is a certainty that one’s best part is elsewhere.
4. The Rain: The Prayer of Union- This is hard to describe. This is when the heavenly rain saturates the whole garden in abundance and our souls are completely united with God.

These experiences do not happen in a linear way. They are instead, experiences that people encounter at different times in the course of prayer. Our work is to be open, to pay attention, and to pray…Ask God how your garden/soul needs watering and pay attention to the responses. If you are interested in exploring or pursuing different forms of prayer that might take you to a deeper space, call me or talk to me after worship. I will be in the library and those of

you who are interested in this can come and talk about it. I have been fortunate enough to have people on my journey who have helped me learn different ways to pray. I would love to see how God might be leading us here in Batavia to greater depth and connection.

A legend tells how, at the beginning of time, God resolved to hide Godself within creation. As God was wondering how best to do this, the angels gathered round God. “I want to hide myself in my creation,” God told them. “I need to find a place that is not too easily discovered, for it is in their search for me that my creatures will grow in spirit and in understanding.” “Why don’t you hide yourself deep in their earth?” the first angel suggested. God pondered for a while, then replied, “No. It will not be long before they learn how to mine the earth and discover all the treasures that it contains. They will discover me too quickly, and they will not have had enough time to their growing.” “Why don’t you hide yourself on their moon?” A second angel suggested. God thought about this idea for a while, and then replied, “No. It will take a little longer, but before too long they will learn how to fly through space. They will arrive on the moon and explore its secrets, and they will discover me too soon, before they have had enough time to do their growing.” The angels were at a loss to know what hiding places to suggest. There was a long silence. “I know,” piped up one angel, finally. “Why don’t you hide yourself within their own hearts? They will never think of looking there!” “That’s it! God said, delighted to have found the perfect hiding place. And so it is that God hides secretly deep within the heart of every one of God’s creatures, until that creature has grown enough in spirit and in understanding to risk the great journey into the secret core of its own being. And there, the creature discovers its creator, and is rejoined to God for all eternity.