



Finding God—This Place and On The Move

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 28:10-22

October 17, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Sally S. Wright

I recently found myself standing in a crowd of 87,000 people, all of them swaying back and forth, holding on to each other. Even my children were holding on and swaying. This is not a new experience for me, but it is one I had not participated in for about ten years. This is what it is like to be a Fighting Texas Aggie sawing during our war hymn. In case you do not know what I am talking about, I graduated with my undergraduate degree from Texas A&M University. We are known for our traditions and our deep spirit.

About a month ago, Karen and I took our twins to their first Aggie football game. This might not seem like an important life milestone to you. In my family, football is as much a part of the fall as pumpkin spice lattes and leaves falling from the trees. Understand that it is a big deal.

You and I know something about having a transcendent experience. We may have recently felt it at a sporting event—that feeling of everyone focused on the same thing at the same time. It may have been at Phog Allen Fieldhouse or Kauffman Stadium or Arrowhead. We love to feel a part of something bigger than ourselves.

The first time you experience thousands of people all doing the same cheer, yell, or song at the same time, it is a powerful experience. This last week I read post after post of Aggies describing what it was like when the team was tied with number-one ranked Alabama. I read of holding their breaths for the final kick, then bursting into tears the moment it went through the uprights, then storming the field to celebrate. It is as if the experience of winning a football game or a championship is as transcendent as the experience of angels moving up and down the ladder to heaven.

Let us take a step back. For the past six weeks,

Tom has been preaching about the six Great Ends of the Church. Basically, we have been talking about six ideals that we strive for as a church. This language, which has been given to us from our spiritual grandparents, is rich and deep.

Today, we are going to go back, way back, about 4,000 years, to a part of the story of Jacob. I think we can find some similarity with it. We might not have deviously stolen from our older brother. But we all know how it feels to be not sure what is next or uncertain of what the future holds.

You and I today constantly live in this state of uncertainty. COVID-19 has heightened this reality. Will COVID end? What is the new normal? Do I need to wear real pants today? Even before COVID, the places we lived, our homes, changed about every decade.

Until about 200 years ago, historians suggest that people thought about the present as a natural progression from the past. And that changes to the present were seen as only temporary. Until about 200 years ago, the landscape, the clothing styles, the type of food, and the technology were likely to be familiar for generations. For example, you would live in the same place, eat the same food and wear the same clothes, use the same tools that your great-grandparents used. And what they used would be passed down through five or six generations. There was a sense of stability, the immovability of time; it was constant and that any change to the status quo was more of a temporary glitch than a potential paradigm shift. It really took an act of God to change the course of history or the future.

This seems foreign to us. Today, you and I see change as a regular—even rapid—occurrence. Technology is constantly changing. Getting a new phone can be a lesson in the progression of technology.

Clothing styles change not just every year but every season. Even the homes we live in change about every 10 years. You are more likely to move than to replace the LED lightbulb you just installed. To say our future is uncertain might seem like the most obvious statement ever spoken in this pulpit. This is where we connect with Jacob.

Jacob knew what it was to be crafting a new future. Before Jacob got the birthright, his path and the family's path was set: the oldest son inherits family land and serves as the patriarch. Yet, when Jacob received the birthright, all of this certainty became, well, uncertain.

It is on this uncertain path forward that the story of God comes crashing in. Jacob is traveling in between towns and he must stop to rest for the night. He wasn't close to family or shelter. He was in the literal wilderness. So, he grabbed the closest rock and made himself comfy and fell asleep. It was in his dreams at night that God came to Jacob and reminded him of the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and offered Jacob a blessing of descendants and land—the exact land that Jacob was resting upon. After waking, Jacob realizes he's met God. So, Jacob's response is to make this site into a place of worship.

After a transcendent experience, after getting in touch with something bigger than ourselves, we want to keep that feeling alive. Jacob made an altar. You and I might buy a t-shirt, take pictures and, of course, post on social media. We want to tell our friends about it and keep reliving the experience.

Jacob places the stone as a reminder that this was the place that God met him and the place that God will bring him and his family back to. This stone is a place that an encounter with God happened, so that every time they pass this place, they will remember to open themselves up to another encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

If it seems as if place is important in this story it is. God met Jacob in this particular place, which is why the place becomes called Beth-el—which in Hebrew means “house of God.” It became a reminder that God blessed Jacob and all of his descendants in this place. So, every encounter with this place would serve as a reminder that in uncertain times,

God's covenant was unchanging.

This is similar to why I think there is such a tie to sporting events and venues. This notion of place as being a reminder is exactly why people love going to football and baseball games. It is the reminder that one time something amazing happened here and maybe today it will happen again. It is the hope that history will repeat itself and our team will win the game or defeat the champions. In our ever-changing world, we keep watching football and baseball games. We keep cheering for our hometown team to be connected to something that is steady—at least steadier than our everyday lives. I felt a sense of home standing in Kyle Field a month ago swaying with 87,000 other Aggies. I haven't felt that in a long time. And I have to admit, it felt good.

Jacob teaches us that what we need more than anything is reminders. Just like Jacob set up a pillar to serve as a reminder, we need a reminder to worship, a reminder to open ourselves to an encounter with Jesus Christ, to allow the Holy Spirit to awaken in us an experience of the divine.

This is a fundamental reason that we show up to worship—we seek to open ourselves up to the possibility that God will encounter us here. We do so because worship offers us a whole array of reminders that the Holy One has been present to us in the past and promises to be with us in the future. We also hope to be reminded that in a constantly changing world, the promises of God are steady and true.

Lest you hear me saying that we can only experience God in places of worship, God also promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes. I want to make clear that the conversation that God and Jacob has does not indicate that God is only going to be where Jacob puts up the pillar. God is not stuck in this place, Beth-el, the “house of God,” between Beer-Sheba and Haran. God promises Jacob, in verse 15, “Know that I am with you and will keep you where ever you go.”

At its very core, this is what the covenant of God is about. The covenant of God indicates that God promises to be with Jacob in this place and wherever he goes. This same promise is ours, too. God promises to meet us in this place (wherever that place is) and in this time (whenever that is). God is

not bound by the limitations of place or time. Our living Lord is one who can meet God's people in the land of Canaan, in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the sanctuary you are sitting in right now, and into the uncertain future that lies before us.

I wonder if remembering the steady and true promises of God is what is really at stake when we choose to encounter the holy places and the holy reminders that God places in our way. We know that reminders are here. Many of you, me included, need the physical place of church, a sanctuary, to be just that—a reminder. In this space, in any sanctuary, we are reminded that the people of God have encountered the risen Lord here in this particular place. Churches can offer us a tangible way to experience worship—the vibrations of the music rattling our bodies, the sound of the words washing over us, encountering God's people again, hearing how God is at work in real people's lives. These are profoundly important reminders.

Yet, the reminders do not only reside in this place. The laptop or iPad on your kitchen table or in your hospital bed, offer the reminder you need to open yourself to God's presence.

Village Church has a long history of sending out reminders from this place. Cards, calls or flowers remind us that the members of Village Church are with us and so is God. Our Stephen Ministers who meet every week with care receivers are tangible expressions of God's reminder that the Holy One is near. Sometimes we are the one reminding others of God's deep and true promises. Other times we show up and are the ones needing a reminder.

Swaying with 87,000 fans a month ago was a powerful reminder to me. So, too, is singing with each and every one of you. You remind me and we remind each other that an experience with God is profound and does not start and end with only one of us. These experiences are meant to be shared with the larger community of believers. I pray that today you feel a moment of the holy in worship. Yet, if today is not that day, keep coming back. God is active and moving in this community of believers and in you.

What is a reminder for you to open yourself to an encounter with the living God? We pray all of this in the name of the one who covenanted with us. Who chose us. And who will never leave us. Amen.