



## From the Pulpit: April 7, 2024

Second Sunday of Easter

### Squire Prince

Genesis 28:10–19

*What's Saving Your Life Right Now? I: The Practice of Waking Up to God! Vision*

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward 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 stairway 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 Beth-el, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.*

**I**t may seem elementary, but I want to start our reflection today with a question, have you ever wanted more out of God? I mean yes we come here on Sundays, we sing, one of the ministers speaks a few words of hope to us, we rub on Minister Doogie, and then we go home. At some point you have to wonder, is that all there is, God?

Isn't there more? I mean what happened to the God of five loaves and two fish? What about the parting of the waters in Exodus? At Least you can turn this cup of water into wine.... I mean coffee, God!

*"how are we  
connecting to  
that source  
of all life,  
love, and  
liberation?"*

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *An Altar in the World* helps to remove the scales from our eyes to the greater dimensions of God's presence in the world around us. She points out that all of us in a sense, have a longing for an experience with the one we call God, and maybe that experience, that treasure, that Divine Spirit is right under our noses. A priest once asked Barbara to come speak at his church, and when she asked what he wanted her to talk about, he simply said "come tell us what is saving your life right now"<sup>1</sup>.

What's saving your life right now? Bill, I don't think you could've found a better sermon series title! For the next several weeks we as a church are going to explore what it is that is saving us. What is it that we find life giving? Or put more theologically, how are we connecting to that source of all life, love, and liberation? Today we start with a practice that seems so simple, but takes practice, waking up! Let us pray...

Now I don't know about you all, but I love a good nap. Especially these last few months where my days are spent either in a classroom somewhere talking about the historicity and literary criticism of the Hebrew scriptures, or spent running around this building, prepping lessons, and praying with students and families. Nothing makes me happy like a good mid-day nap.

<sup>1</sup>Taylor, B. B. (2010). *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne.

I know I'm not the only person here who can appreciate this. But when I was younger, nothing would grind my gears more than someone trying to set me down for a nap. I had extreme FOMO, fear of missing out. My childish brains concocted this idea that the adults were doing all the fun stuff while I was napping. Now that I am something akin to an adult, I now realize all they were doing was napping themselves, but nonetheless, I resisted naps. I didn't want to miss out on the fun.

Our friend Jacob is leaving out on a journey. Family problems have become deadly, and now Jacob is fleeing to go stay with his uncle and marry one of his cousins. The Bible can be a weird place. Anyway as he's on this journey, it gets late and he decides to camp out one night. While he's sleeping he has this experience. This dream. This vision. In it he sees a divine escalator reaching up to Heaven, with Angels doing their business, and then God shows us promising provision, protection, and presence. And then as quickly as the vision came, it was as quickly as it went. Then he wakes up and says "wow, woah, wait, what?"

Have you ever heard of the Pixar movie *The Incredibles*? It's this movie about a superhero family that has had to blend into normal society as the culture around them deemed superheroes a hindrance instead of a help. Well at a certain point, everyone needs a superhero. If you haven't seen the movie, go see it. But towards the end the family has to do one final battle to save the youngest child of the Par family. And as the family exerts their powers, Mr. Incredible with his superhuman strength, Mrs. Incredible with her elastic flexibility, Dash with his indescribable speed, and Violet with her invisibility and force field powers, there is this one neighborhood kid, sitting on his bike, an onlooker of the craziness, chaos, and awesomeness that is this family. He looks at how this family works together to save one of their own. And as the dust settles, and the family becomes aware that he is there, he blurts out "**that was totally wicked**". A favorite line of mine!

But the beauty of it isn't in the family battle styles, or even in the CGI, it is in the fact that this superhero family, this family of the extraordinary, stand in front of their typical suburban house. A house that blends in with all the other houses. A house that on the outside looks normal, but on the inside is bursting with the amazing. I feel like this is Jacob. In this

ordinary place, and then God shows up. For him the ordinary becomes the extraordinary. The natural becomes the supernatural. The normal becomes abnormal. And then Jacob wakes up and says "That was totally wicked".

Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on this saying "Even if Jacob could never find the exact place where the feet of that heavenly ladder came to earth—even if he could never find a single angel footprint in the sand—his life was changed for good"<sup>2</sup>. But what if the line between natural

and supernatural wasn't as thick as we think it is? What if the demarcation between sacred and secular isn't as divisive as our culture wants us to believe. What if the God we meet at the altar in the church is the same God that meets us outside in the natural sanctuaries of our backyards, and sitting in city traffic, and even in those beautiful passing moments with our family? What if those sacred moments that warm our hearts are beckoning to us in the sanctuary and at the dinner table with our children? What if the presence of God is more than just the 4 walls of this

physical building?

Barbara Brown Taylor says that "the House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other"<sup>3</sup>. That means that yes, while I love coming into this place of worship, this house of God, the warmth that I feel here, and the presence that we seek here transcends these walls. The presence of the Divine permeates out from here, not only within here. Richard Rohr is a Prolific Franciscan Friar, teacher, and theologian, and in his book "The Universal Christ" he shares with us readers that "When I know that the world around is both the hiding place and the revelation of God, I can no longer make a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the holy and the profane"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Taylor, B. B. (2010). *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne.

<sup>3</sup>Taylor, B. B. (2010). *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne.

<sup>4</sup>Rohr, R. (2021). *The Universal Christ: How A Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*. Convergent.

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What a thought! The world that I inhabit is pregnant with revelation of the loving presence of God and is just calling for me to see it. Not only is God calling to us in this space (the Sanctuary), but also in those spaces out there, and in this space (my heart). Taylor goes on to say “Jacob woke while God’s breath was still sitting the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him: same wilderness, same rocks, same sand.... ‘Surely the Lord is in this place,’ he said out loud, ‘and I did not know it’”<sup>5</sup>

Where are those hidden places that God is manifesting in our own lives that we are missing? Where are we sleeping while the presence of God is moving? Henri Nouwen is another prolific catholic priest and theologian. He writes in his book *Discernment* “The Lord, who is the creator of the Universe, comes to us in smallness, weakness, and hiddenness. When I have no eyes for the small signs of God’s presence—the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement, and gestures of a love offer by friends—I remain spiritually blind...”<sup>6</sup> Nouwen comments in an earlier chapter “...God’s presence is in the things that are closest to us, things that we touch and feel, that we move and live with day by day”<sup>7</sup>

God’s presence is in the things that are closest to us. Yes God’s presence is in this place, and we pray for our eyes to be opened to the moving of God in our lives, in our shared time in the place, and in our community. But God’s presence is at your dinner table while your kids share their latest achievement on their video game, or when your spouse is going on about their favorite athlete or singer, or even when your coworker is sharing yet again more pictures of their grandbabies. It’s funny, it is usually in those moments we deem annoying, or as just chaotic disturbances that God is calling out to us, telling us to slow down and smell the flowers of life. Holy interruptions, in which the

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<sup>5</sup>Taylor, B. B. (2010). *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne.

<sup>6</sup>Newman, H. J. M., Laird, R., & Christensen, M. J. (2015). *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>7</sup>Newman, H. J. M., Laird, R., & Christensen, M. J. (2015). *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

Spirit of God calls out to us, beckoning us to the altar, to drink from the cup of eternal life and love.

You know what’s funny. As Easter taught us, a lot can happen in three days, and as well, a lot can happen in a week. Earlier this week, I was very much prepared to share how the miracle of Jacob’s story is that God showed up in an ordinary place and made it extraordinary, and God can do the same for us. But as I was writing this sermon at 3:30 am Saturday morning, I felt the Spirit calling me to see, it

wasn’t that God just showed up to this ordinary place, but rather, that God was already in that place, Jacob just hadn’t realized it. The altar was not to usher in the Spirit of God to that place, but to remind all who came to it to remember that God is already in that place.

God is already here. Yes here in this sanctuary, but also at the beach as we look out past the water to the expanse of air and mist. God is already here. Yes

here in this manmade temple, but also in moving through the trees in the rainforest of Costa Rica. God is already here, yes at Kenilworth Union Church but also in your living room, family room, game room, offices, classrooms, board rooms, on the train, on the plane, in your car, near and far. We can cry out like Jacob “Wow, God is in this place” when we slow down and remember that every moment is pregnant with this overwhelming presence and love of God.

Many of you I’m sure have heard about my experience in 2022 of the Confirmation Wilderness trip. I had never done something like that before, and it really tested me physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Even taking the smallest step forward felt like the biggest act of faith and determination. I remember one day we got to our campsite for the night, and I collapsed on my bag, and I’m pretty sure I just laid there for about 45 minutes to an hour (I wish I was exaggerating) trying to remember who I was and who these people were around me. As I was sitting there, one of our wilderness confirmands came to me and said “Squire turn around, you have got to see this waterfall, it is so beautiful” and while I could hear the waterfall, in what is called the “Enchanted Valley”, I was more focused on missing my bed, and a McDonald’s Big Mac to really care. Truly the presence of God was in that place, and I did not know it! That’s why this year, I can’t wait for the confirmation wilderness trip. I can’t wait for the ways in which God shouts God’s presence to us.

“We can cry  
out like Jacob  
“Wow, God is  
in this place””

## —The Great Prayer— The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

In the sounds of the waterfalls. In the chirp of the birds. In the laughter of our confirmands as they share stories and create new friendships. In the sounds of my whimpers and tears as I grapple with my own weaknesses and shortcomings. Even in that place God is there.

Richard Rohr encourages us to adopt the incarnational worldview<sup>8</sup> that recognizes the presence of the divine in literally everything and everyone. Meaning taking time to slow down and exploring how the hands of God are moving in each moment. Realizing that everywhere, the world is overflowing with God's presence, calling you in the small places to come taste and see that the Lord is good. In that place that seems ordinary, God is there, birthing extraordinary miracles before us. Calling us in the still small voice. Beckoning us in love.

Caryll Houselander writes about an experience in her book *A Rocking Horse Catholic*. She says "I was in an underground train in which all sorts of people jostled together sitting and strap-hanging—workers of every description going home at the end of their day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because he was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.

I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere—Christ"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Rohr, R. (2021). *The Universal Christ: How A Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*. Convergent.

<sup>9</sup>Houselander, C. (2013). *A Rocking Horse Catholic*. Nabu Press.

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Sovereign God, Creator of earth and space, ocean and stream, storm and wind:

During this Easter season the earth itself reminds us of resurrection. After a long dormant chill, we can feel its heart beating once again, and the springs beneath flowing with the urgency of a world made young again. We give you thanks for the reliable rhythms of this tilted planet and its life-giving star. Summer and winter and seed time and harvest. Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above, join with all nature and manipls witness, to your great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

We're thankful for the generosity and courage of organizations like the World Central Kitchen and stunned by the indiscriminate violence that stalks them. We dare to pray Lord that you protect aid workers in Gaza, patch together the broken hearts of those left behind by those who are gone. We should be able to figure out these disputes on our own, but we don't seem to be able to. Please send your transfiguring spirit to reshape stone cold hearts.

If any here be ill or troubled, bring home your healing touch. If any here be anxious waiting for uncertain news or changes in life, grant your peace. If any here be imprisoned behind walls of addiction or tense relationships or the confinement of small self-centeredness or untoward ambition, send your freeing grace that bonds might come undone, and life turned out to the outer world.

Lord, this is your feast prepared by your longings spread by your command, attended by your invitation, blessed by your word, distributed by your hand. The undying memorial of your sacrifice upon the cross, the full gift of your everlasting love, and its perpetuation until time shall end. Lord this is the bread of heaven, the bread of life, and whom so ever eats of this bread shall never hunger again. This is the cup of pardon, healing, gladness, and strength, that whom so ever drinks of this cup thirsts never again. May we come O Lord to your table and Lord Jesus, come to us and hear us as we pray the ancient prayer: Our Father.... Amen.