

Nowhere Man Genesis 28:10-19a

So was it worth it? It's a question that's gotta be asked? Jacob had been wrestling with his brother their whole lives, trying to be first, trying to be top dog, trying to reach for the golden ring. And now he had it. The whole enchilada. Esau's birthright, Isaac's blessing, boasting rights as family patriarch, the entire inheritance. It was all his. And he wasn't going to be able to do a darned thing with any of it. Esau may have been a patsy once, but he wasn't about to let Jacob get away with it the second time, and now Jacob's life wasn't worth a plugged nickel if he ever showed his face back at home. So what was the point of all that? He got what he wanted, what he had always wanted, but he would never be able to reap the benefits of all that conniving and scheming and cheating.

And now, instead of being a landowner, the wealthy patriarch of a respected family, Jacob was a man on the lam; the richest, most important fugitive around, and he had no place to go, but his best hope was to head towards Pad'dan ar'am, to his grandfather's and uncle's place, to see if they might offer him protection and, almost as urgent in his father's eyes, a wife. He wasn't on an important journey, an honorable mission. He hadn't been sent; he was running away. He was hiding.

And it was there – nowhere actually – that God came to Jacob in a dream. It was there – nowhere – with only the hard ground for his bed and a rock for his pillow, that Jacob came to the astonishing realization that God was in that place! Is it any wonder that he didn't know it?

Most of the time when we say "God was in this place," it's when we were in some kind of spiritual nirvana. It is in a place that is befitting a holy visit. We say, "God was in this place" when we were worshipping by candlelight around Lake Susan on the last night of the youth conference. We say, "God was in this place" when we had our baby baptized and all the family was there. Those are the kinds of times that we are filled with awe and say to ourselves, "Wow! God was here!"

But that's not how it usually happened in the Bible. Like Jacob, Moses was out in the middle of the desert hiding out, in his case for murder, when he found himself on holy ground talking.

David had been dispatched to keep the carnivores away from the family fortune while his big brothers got all the cool jobs when Samuel and God came along and said that he was Israel's anointed.

Peter and the other disciples were in a boat in the middle of a terrible storm, frightened for their lives when they came to the realization that the man in the boat with them was someone far greater than an itinerant prophet and preacher from Nazareth.

They weren't in the temple, or synagogue. No one was at a retreat, or praying in their special spot in the woods. None of them were on pilgrimage, or in what we might think of as a thin place. There's an exceptionally good chance that Mary was out doing laundry or making supper when Gabriel stopped by to tell her she was going to be the mother of God in a few months. Most were nowhere – nowhere special. Nowhere sacred. Nowhere dramatically lit or gloriously sceneried. And sometimes, they were really nowhere – the place didn't even have a name so you could put a pin on the map to mark it.

And yet... "God was in this place."

I have an idea that that is a refrain that should be on our lips most days – God was in this place, and I had no idea. Somehow we've gotten it into our heads that those are rarified, special occasions, God choosing someone, God showing himself to someone, God sending someone. But go back to that visit to Jacob under the stars in the middle of nowhere. What was God there to do? To choose, yes; to send, yes; to reveal himself, yes. But God was mostly there to remind Jacob of the promises: that God would be with him, wherever he went. That was good to know, wasn't it, especially since he was nowhere and currently headed nowhere certain or safe, but God would be there with him, protecting him every step of the way. Jacob and his family would be blessed, and blessed to be a blessing – yes, there would be a family, and despite all his duplicity, God would still continue to keep covenant with them. Jacob would be the father of a great nation. Despite how things looked here, in the middle of nowhere, Jacob would be just fine.

So maybe we don't get angels on ladders every day, or personal commissions, but God's promises and assurance follow us wherever we go – special places, holy places, thin places, and no places. Wherever we go God is in that place, because God meets us there with constant reminders of all his promises: Lo, I will be with you always... I will not leave you desolate, but I will send the Comforter to be with you... Come to me, all you who are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest... Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be satisfied... If God clothes the grass of the field, how much more will he clothe you?... Peace be with you... God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

It is possible that you might be in a thin place, or a retreat, or a sanctuary but more often than not you will be in the car, or in a hospital waiting room, or the office, or even in the middle of nowhere. You could be at Montreat, or presenting a baby to be baptized, but it is far more likely that you will be mowing the yard, or wishing you could quit your job, or trying to make a big decision.

Your take-home point today comes in the form of a rock. Jacob took that rock he was using as a pillow and used it to mark that place where God was. Every time he passed by it he would be reminded of God's visit and God's promises. People did that fairly often in scripture, mark those holy places where they encountered God with a rock.

Now, my original plan was to hand each of you a rock this morning. They weren't going to be special rocks, they weren't going to be shiny or smooth or pretty, and they weren't going to come from any place you might consider especially significant. They were going to come from here, there, and nowhere. And I was going to ask you to keep your rock with you to remind you that wherever you are, here, there, or nowhere in particular, God is in that place assuring you of his covenant promises. Jacob said something significant: God was in this place, and I didn't know it. This was to be a reminder, so you wouldn't be caught off guard, so you would watch for it, and listen for it. God is in this place, wherever you happen to be.

But something had to go this week, and rock-gathering was it, so instead, what I want you to do is find your own rock. This afternoon, or tomorrow, whenever you hear that Comforter that Jesus promised whisper to you that you are not alone, or that God will watch over you, or that you have been forgiven, so let go of it.

"God was in this place!" Those words should cross our lips a dozen times a day. God was in this place. And I knew it.