

Sacred Spaces – Genesis 28:10-19a

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Sacred space. It's a term that probably conjures up a wide variety of places in your minds. Sometimes sacred spaces are overtly faith-oriented—like a small group that gathers for Bible study and discussion. Or, an outdoor worship space like this on a beautiful summer morning. Or, the beauty of a sanctuary like ours—with the stained glass and the instruments.

Other times, though, sacred spaces are those that are not so overtly religious. They are the spaces where it's not so much where the space is but who is occupying the space.

This week, I watched an interview with the comedian Jim Gaffigan. After the pandemic, he and a college buddy of his put his name on a new brand of bourbon—Father Time Bourbon. He had never really drank bourbon before, but he had somehow become part of a group of what he calls bourbon nerds that have formed this community of folks interested in bourbon tastes, smells, and flavors. It's not so much the drinking of alcohol as it is the camaraderie bourbon nerds have with each other.

I guess you could say bourbon (and everything that goes with it) is a sacred space for them?

The person conducting that interview was the news man Brian Williams, who responded to Gaffigan's remarks about bourbon people forming their own community by talking about how he's been a volunteer fireman for many years. And the same kind of bonds exist within that

community. He talked about how they do fire drills in real life fire situations, and he feels a huge sense of calm and place with his fellow fire fighters in those intense moments.

Sacred space amid the fire with your brothers?

Sacred space, I suppose, is any occasion or moment when we sense the presence of the Holy — overtly or mysteriously. And that often comes either in solitude but just as often with communities of like-minded or like-hearted people. Moments when we know that God — or the goodness of God — is especially present among us.

It is surprising at times the places where God becomes visible even when we don't see God. And often, sacred moments involve people who we would think God would be the least likely to appear before.

As a case in point, consider Jacob from our Genesis reading. Here's an unholy man if there ever was one. He looks only to his own instincts to interpret life, and when we pick up the story, he's already made a mess of things. He's cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, deceived his blind old man into giving him the blessing meant for Esau, and is now on his way to stay with relatives because things have gotten too hot for him back home.

No matter. God sees something valuable in this schemer that apparently even Jacob himself doesn't perceive. And so, when Jacob, on the road to his new home lies down to sleep one night, God comes to him in a dream, promising to give Jacob many descendants who will be blessed and will occupy the land through which Jacob has been passing. What's more, God promises to be with Jacob. And at this point, at least, God asks for nothing in return.

And as Jacob's presence in this Genesis story reinforces, sacred spaces are for the sinners as much as they are for the saints.

When Jacob awakes, he's perceptive enough to realize that something very important has happened, and that although Jacob hadn't expected it, the Lord really was in that place. And what Jacob does next suggests that he's a bit of a changed man: He sets the stone upon which he was sleeping on end as a pillar and pours oil on it as an act of worship.

To Jacob of all people and in the least likely of manners—a dream that depicted angels coming and going on a ladder to heaven—God makes such an impression that Jacob is able to confess: Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.

Sometimes, the presence of the Lord is quite expected. We would expect God to show up here, for example, in a place where we harken the spirit of God to appear every Sunday morning. We would expect God to show up in the hospital room of a beloved friend or family member as they struggle to get well. We would expect God to show up in the presence of a grieving family or community that suffers tragic loss.

And yet, when we sense Christ's presence in places like a bourbon club or a fire department or in a dream while resting one's head upon a rock in some lonely place, its effects can be quite dramatic. Because it's in those places where we errantly think God doesn't wander all too often. It's in those places where we might be inclined to think God doesn't go—and yet because of our faith we leave with a palpable sense of the divine.

We all face many temptations in our lives. And one of those temptations is the thinking that it is better to be certain about God's love than to believe in it by faith, the thinking that we must be certain about God, in fact, showing up rather than having faith that God can appear in less likely places.

As Presbyterian pastor Pastor Craig Barnes wrote in an article on temptation in *Presbyterians Today* magazine, "Few things are more dangerous to our spirituality than certainty. That's because spirituality thrives only in the context of choices we have to make when we are not certain."

For Jacob that night while sleeping with his head against a rock, he avoided the temptation of needing certainty to affirm God's presence. If he had succumbed to a need for certainty, he may very well have not been able to affirm in that surprising place the presence of the Divine.

In truth, we are all firmer believers when we don't have all the proof. Because in the absence of certainty, we find our faith. And it is our faith—the belief in things unseen, that most likely urges us to confess our faith in Christ as Lord.

In his book, *Beyond the Worship Wars* Tom Long sets out to research what makes for excellent churches. And in talking with all kinds of people in thriving congregations around the country, the number one factor he discovers, is "the room these churches make in their lives—especially in their worship—for the experience of mystery."

The leaders of these congregations realize that worship is a place where human beings encounter God—a sacred

space. It is an event to which people come, expecting to be touched, somehow, by the divine presence. And that rarely requires having all the evidence of God.

Much to our surprise God shows up in those places where his children don't need proof to affirm God is there.

The place where this occurs in this story is a town called Bethel.

Bethel is a city of immense importance. The Bible mentions it more than any other city except Jerusalem. It's in the center of Israel. At one point, it's home to the ark of the covenant (Judges 20:26–27). Important people have connections to Bethel, including Deborah (Judges 4:5), Samuel (1 Samuel 7:16), Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29–33), Elijah (2 Kings 2:2–3), Elisha (2 Kings 2:23), and Amos (Amos 5:6).¹ It was an important worship site for the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 12:26–30).

But it was not a city of empire like Babylon. For it was in Babylon that exiles would have heard that that's where heaven and earth meet-- and it was home to a massive pyramid-like structure covered with staircases. Inhabitants of that city assumed that divine beings traveled up and down these staircases, moving from heaven to earth and back.

It's not in the empire's capital of Babylon, Genesis insists, that God is found and heaven and earth meet. It's in a small town in the middle of Israel. That's where God's angels ascend and descend a stairway to heaven. That's where heaven and earth kiss.

This story tells us that if you want to find God, do not listen to the empires of this age or their propaganda. Don't

assume that might makes right. Don't fall for the lie that God's power aligns with human power. Look for God in the small, the ordinary, the unexpected places that the world misses. Whether it's at Bethel, a manger, or a cross, a bourbon club, a firehouse, a small group, among sinners (all of us) or saints, God shows up.