

“Thin Places”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Genesis 28:10-19

New Testament lesson: Hebrews 11:8-12

The ancient Greeks told the story of Theseus, who entered a fearsome maze called “Labyrinth.” The Labyrinth had been built by an evil wizard to house the Minotaur: a ferocious monster that looked like a man with a bull’s head. Even if Theseus succeeded in killing the Minotaur, he might never find his way out of the enchanted maze.

So, what does Theseus do? He carries with him a ball of string, and ties one end of it to the entrance of the Labyrinth. After he reaches the center and slays the monster, he traces the string back to the entrance, safe and sound.

There are times and places in life when we just know “the Lord is right here besides us,” and we would do anything to find our way back to that place of safety and insight.

Jacob, in our Old Testament reading for today, was in such a place as he traveled from Beer-sheba toward Haran. His experience can guide us in finding our way back to the Lord when we’re feeling lost and in need of God’s guidance and wisdom and provision.

Before he left Beer-sheba, Jacob was already in a place of safety, comfort, and familiarity. Beer-sheba is in Canaan, the land promised to his father Isaac through Abraham, as we heard in today’s New Testament reading.

But Jacob was not to stay in this land of safety, comfort and familiarity. God had bigger plans for him. Jacob is sent to Haran in search of what’s next. This happens right after Jacob has stolen his brother, Esau’s, birthright, tricking his father into giving him the family blessing. So Jacob probably is not traveling with the cleanest heart. He’s got to be wondering what God has in store for him.

Nighttime comes and Jacob picks a spot to sleep. He lays his head on a nearby stone and begins to dream. There before him is a ladder going up from the earth and reaching all the way to heaven. The angels of God are ascending and descending the ladder. And that’s when Jacob has his “God encounter” – the Lord standing right there beside him.

Funny that it comes at a time of uncertainty and fear. And yet that’s often the case with our most profound encounters with God. Even if it’s a joyful time – like getting married, the birth of a baby, or the start of new job – there’s usually a degree of uncertainty and fear.

It is times like this that we need God to show us the way, to assure us that everything is working out according to God's plan and purpose. Whether or not we receive that guidance and assurance is another matter.

It can be hard to sense God's presence when we need it most, to hear God speaking into our struggle or concern. We become gripped by fear, or maybe racked with guilt, and we just can't see things so clearly.

When we have trouble sensing that God is near to us, that's when we need a way back to God, a "spiritual string," if you will, to follow through our Labyrinths of life, a touchstone that helps us enter into God's presence anew.

Jacob, after his encounter with God, set up the stone he slept on as a pillar – a marker – for the Lord. He poured oil over it, signifying that this is a special place where God speaks to God's people.

Do you believe God speaks to us more clearly in certain places? Many people do. They call these "thin places," places where the separation between us and God seems as thin as a sheer piece of silk. But do you want to know a secret? There are no "thin places." Or rather, every place can be a thin place. God is everywhere.

It's like the Princeton Seminary students in the lunch line one day. It seems the cook had put a sign on a bowl of big, juicy oranges that said: Take only one. God is watching.

At the other end of the lunch line, there was a large plate of freshly baked cookies. So, one of the seminarians quickly wrote a sign and put it there, saying, over it that said: Take as many cookies as you want. God is back there watching the oranges.

Noooo! God is everywhere, and it's just a matter of finding a spot for us where we can get real with God, a place where the world slips away and heaven opens up. Thin places can be anyplace where we remember that God loves us, cares for us, and has a plan for us.

The best way for us to stay connected to such "thin places" is to do what Jacob did – to create a place set aside as special between you and God, and then to return to it daily, connecting with God.

John Philip Newell, in his book *A New Harmony: The Spirit, the Earth, and the Human Soul*, says these places "are like sacraments. They disclose to us the thinness that is everywhere present, but that we often fail to access.

When we fail to enter into these thin places with God, it's because we have not made the effort to recognize them and set them apart. Do that. Find a place in your life that you can set aside for just you and the Lord. Return to it regularly. Stay there awhile. Notice how God speaks to you.

Or maybe you're not a "quiet-place" kind of person. That's OK! Thin places don't actually have to be places. Remember, God is everywhere. Some people feel God's presence and hear God's voice most clearly while they're being active, maybe in their work, or playing a sport, or taking a run.

Some of you have no doubt heard of Brother Lawrence – the monk who felt closest to God while washing dishes for the monastery? That was the task given to him by his superior, and in pouring himself into his work, Brother Lawrence found God. That, too, is a thin place.

Why might some people fail to recognize just how close God is, the care and provision God provides, the wisdom and insight God gives? Some people kid themselves into thinking they're too busy. But as we just saw with Brother Lawrence, even the hardest workers have access to God's presence, if they're open to it.

Some people don't feel worthy of God's presence in their lives, at least not the positive presence that God is. They don't think they have anything to offer or they feel their past is too tarnished.

But as we saw with Jacob the conniving son of Isaac – stealing his brother's birth right – God is able to overcome and redeem anything we've done, if we open ourselves up to God's preserve in our lives.

Jacob was open to God's leading, setting out as he was told, moving forward toward an uncertain future. And God met him along the way, redeemed his past and set him on the course of a glorious future.

There is nothing we have done – nothing we can do – that God cannot overcome and redeem. We just have to be willing to sit in the presence of God, and to do that regularly. Not just on Sunday, but during the week – when life is coming at us full force. That's when things really challenge us, that's when we need God the most. If we set aside a time and place – or an activity – as special between us and God, God will lead us step by step toward a glorious future.

God took Jacob's past from faithful Abraham and the deceitful Jacob – and brought it all into the present, saying "the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring." And then God extended this blessing into the future, assuring Jacob, "All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring." What more could we want – past, present and future aligned to God's will and God's purpose?

If you do not have a regular place or practice that draws you into the presence of God, take a moment this week to think of where or when that might be for you. Set it apart as sacred time, a sacred spot, and spend time there this week. Return to it regularly – bringing your past, present and future before the Lord. And do it faithfully, not trying to manipulate God or hear only what you want to hear. But be open to God speaking to you in perhaps unexpected ways, on God's timetable, however God might speak to you.

In Christ, we, too, are children of Abraham, heirs of the promise. In Christ, we, too, are guided by God toward a brighter future. In Christ, we draw near to God to listen to God's voice, and follow God's guidance. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives, and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ.

Especially we praise and thank you for promises kept and hope for tomorrow, the enjoyment of friends, the joy of family, the wonders of your creation, those who have gone before us, love from our parents, love from our family members, our faith and the church.

God of grace, remind us that we are all your children, for we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

We offer our prayers for those whom you love. Especially we pray for those we too often forget: people who have lost hope, those who mourn, those who suffer because of war, those who are lonely or sick, those who go hungry.

God our guardian, come now to us with new strength to renew our spirits. Be our protector and help in our time of need. Help us to look into the future with confidence and assurance.

O God, the great giver, thank you for your daily blessings. We bless your name for the gifts you shower upon us. We are unworthy and humbled.

Thank you for all you do, and for the gift of sending your son, Jesus Christ, for our sake. It is in his name we pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**