

## Online service sermon – 19 July 2014

### *'Finding God in surprising places'*

#### **Setting the scene**

Where is God to be found? This question has occupied the minds of humans since we first began to believe in God. Some people think that God is somehow 'out there', in a place largely beyond our reach or understanding, floating around in space. Other people have sought God in nature: mountain tops, the desert, or a beautiful garden. Sometimes, people have thought God is best found in places built by humans: statues, temples, or churches.

Where have you found God? Like most people, I have struggled in my search. Sometimes, when life is hard or uncomfortable, God feels very far away. Do you ever feel like that? Sometimes we might ask ourselves, is God there when we are hurting? Is God there when we are: sick, lonely, depressed, or in need of comfort? This is a question some of us might be asking ourselves, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Where is God to be found when life is hard? I think the first Bible reading we heard today, the story of Jacob's ladder, tells us that God meets us in surprising places. God promises to remain with us and protects us, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. God does not desert us. This story comes from the book of Genesis, chapter 28.

Last week I spoke about the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau to their parents, Isaac and Rebecca. We heard how, when they were older, Esau didn't value his birthright, or inheritance, and sold it to Jacob for a meal of red lentil stew. But their rivalry didn't end there. Do you remember that Esau was supposed to be hairy? Well, Jacob and his mother took advantage of the fact that Esau was hairy in order to trick Jacob and Esau's father, Isaac. Jacob disguised himself as Esau, by wearing his brother's clothing and attaching animal skins to his arms and neck in order to appear hairy. He then went to his father, Isaac, who was now old and blind, to receive the blessing. This blessing was very important, it was much the same thing as the last will and Testament is today.

Esau was furious at his brother and at first, even wanted to kill him. Jacob went away to escape his brother and travelled to his father's homeland. This is where today's reading begins. In the Genesis, chapter 28, we hear how Jacob had a rough time on his journey. He even had to sleep in the open air with a stone for a pillow. I bought a stone along to help us imagine how uncomfortable he must have been. Imagine using this for a pillow!

Jacob was in a place he thought was barren and hard. It was the last place he expected to find God. But he was wrong! With his head on the stone Jacob sleeps and dreams that there is a ladder reaching from the earth to the heavens. In the dream, angels of God are going up and down the ladder. God speaks to Jacob and promises to be with him and protect him: "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."

However lonely and afraid Jacob felt – with his own brother seeking to kill him, and alone in the darkness, with only a stone for a pillow – God assured him that he need not fear, because God would protect him and would not leave him. Jacob wakes up and realizes that this is no ordinary dream. It is from God. Jacob looks around at the rocky place and shouts: Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!

He takes the stone he had used for a pillow and stands it up as a memorial [stand stone up]. He then pours oil over it [pour oil over it]. In this story we can see how God used

Jacob, even though Jacob was far from perfect. After all, Jacob was a cheat! He cheated his brother Esau of his inheritance.

And God did not appear where Jacob expected. Where Jacob had the dream, there was - no temple, no inspiring music or eloquent sermon, no land full of fertile fields and beautiful flowers. Jacob experienced God's grace in a place he thought was barren and without God. The good news for us today is that God meets us in surprising places. God promises to remain with us and protects us, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. God does not desert his children.

I wonder how many of us have stories to tell of how we met God in strange places? I know that the places God has met me have sometimes been in very surprising places. One of the times was when I was blowing leaves off my mother-in-law's roof. I fell off the roof, ended up in hospital and was called by God to leave my work and start a new job in paid ministry with the Uniting Church.

Another time was at a conference for ministers, a place where you usually expect to learn a few things, meet people, and usually struggle not to be bored (well, at least, that is my experience). But here, at this conference, I experienced something rather like a vision on the importance of developing people's gifts. Of all my experiences, it was the closest to that experienced by Jacob. God meets us in surprising places.

But why should we be surprised that such things happen? After all, we couldn't run from God's presence even if we tried. Psalm 139, another of our readings today, says

*'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.'*

The writer of this psalm is confident that God is always with him, It doesn't matter where he is or how he feels, God is still there. God's hand will hold him and never let him go. And now we have the additional revelation, that as Christians, God's Spirit resides in each of us, so much so that those who follow Christ are called, 'children of God'. And so, when we search for and struggle to find God, may we know that the Spirit of God that is within us, and in our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Let us live as children of God, and not as children of this world. Let us remember that God is within us, and not grieve the Holy Spirit by the wrong things we do. And let us remember the glorious things that have been promised to us. As the Apostle Paul says in the reading from Romans today,

*'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.'*

There is no place we can go where we will be forgotten by God. There is no place we can fall into that God cannot find us. God restores us, and sets our feet back on right paths. We are forgiven, loved, and restored. We can live on earth and still touch heaven! When we come to rocky places in **our** lives, may we be able to say like Jacob:

*'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! How awesome is this place!'*