

The LORD is Here!
I. With his Presence
II. With his Promises

Genesis 28:10-17

¹⁰Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹²He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Have you ever experienced anything like what we are going through these days? To basically be locked up in our houses, forced to stay away from other people, for fear that we might contract a virus that has the potential to send us to the hospital (if there's room), to be treated by medical staff (if they have the right equipment), as we await a vaccine (that may or may not be developed), all while wondering what's going to happen to our jobs, who's going to take care of the kids, how will we pay the bills, how long will this last, what about our elderly parents, how many are going to get sick, and how many will die? It's enough to leave anyone feeling a little anxious, at least unsettled, about what the future holds. And the fact that we have to try to cope with all these things while also being separated from the people we love, well, that can make it all the harder. It can leave us feeling isolated, anxious and afraid.

But you know, we are not the only ones who have experienced emotions like these. Down through history, there have been plenty of people who have been in situations that left them feeling the same way. In fact, in our study of God's word today, we're going to meet one of those people. We're going to look at an event in the life of the patriarch Jacob. We're going to draw some parallels between what he was going through and what we are going through. And we're going to find that what Jacob discovered to be true in his life, is still true in our lives today. Today we celebrate the wonderful truth that:

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II. He's here with his promises

Now, I said that we were going to draw some parallels between what we are currently going through here in the United States and what Jacob was going through here in our text. Or maybe more specifically, we're going to draw some parallels between the emotions that Jacob

was experiencing and the emotions that we might be experiencing. Like what emotions? Well, like maybe the fear of dying. Tell me that has not crossed your mind as the death toll from COVID 19 keeps going higher and higher, and the deaths keep coming closer and closer. When you realize that there are going to be people you know who will contract Coronavirus, and a certain percentage of those people will likely not survive, that's scary!

Now, did Jacob face any of those same fears? Well, look at it this way. If you come into contact with the wrong person and you contract coronavirus, your chances of dying are currently about 1.5%. If you're Jacob and you come into contact with the wrong person, namely your brother Esau, your chances of dying are about 100%. Isn't that right? Remember, after Jacob stole the birthright from his brother, Esau vowed to kill him. Scripture tells us, *When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and told him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you. Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Heron."* (Genesis 27:42-43)—

Which leads to a second emotion that you and I and Jacob might well be feeling these days, namely, the feeling of isolation. Isn't that right? This is a different world we are living in these days. Social distancing has become the new norm. And while modern technology allows us to talk and chat and video stream with each other, there are still a whole lot of people we can't even get close to, maybe even members of our own family, including our Mount Olive family. Can't touch them. Can't hug them. Can't be with them. Is it any wonder we're feeling a little isolated?

Well, isn't that exactly what Jacob was going through, to an even greater degree? Back in 2020 BC, there were no cell phones or Google Hangouts. Jacob is basically all alone, running for his life. He's traveled three days journey away from his parents and has another two weeks of travel before he sees anyone he knows. Chances are, as he lays his head down with a rock for a pillow, he's feeling pretty isolated.

And maybe a bit concerned about what his future holds—I mean, including his financial future. Jacob would later recount that he left Beersheba with only his staff in his hand. He undoubtedly faced a lot of uncertainties about where he get his next meal, where he would stay, how long this journey would last. Tell me, can you relate? Feeling some uncertainty about where the next meal will come from, or what the next paycheck will look like, or how long this journey is going to last? The very same thoughts, the same concerns that are running through your head, were probably running through Jacob's head too, as he lay on the ground, all by himself, under a dark sky.

But there was probably one more thing that was weighing heavy on Jacob's heart that night. And that is, the feeling of guilt. As he lay there all by himself, how could he not be thinking about what he did to his brother? He used deception to steal the blessing that Isaac intended to give to Esau. And when his father, whose eyesight was fading, started to get suspicious and asked Jacob outright, *"Are you really my son Esau?"* what did Jacob say? *"I am," he replied* (Gen. 27:24). He lied to his father's face. And now he was eating the fruit of that lie. As he lay there on the hard ground, don't you think that Jacob was thinking, "Because of my sin, I'm now separated from my family." :And because of my sin, I wonder if I'm also now separated from God.

Again, is there a parallel between Jacob's situation and the situation that we find ourselves in today? No, the pandemic we're enduring was not caused by a specific sin we committed. We are not going through this because of something we did to make God angry. But that thought is never far from our minds, is it? As we kind of review our lives, as we think about

the lies we've told to get what we want, or to cover up what we didn't want anyone else to find out about, as we think about the times we've disrespected those in authority or took a "pick and choose" attitude toward God's Commandments, or just kind of went through the motions in our spiritual lives, it's only natural to think, "Maybe God is upset with me. Maybe that's why I'm going through this trouble. Maybe God is kind of turning the tables on me. For all the times that I acted like I wanted nothing to do with God, maybe he now wants nothing to do with me." As we consider what's going on in our hearts and our lives, I don't think it's that hard to see that's exactly what was happening with Jacob as well.

The question is, did God have anything to say to Jacob while he was in that state of mind? Is there anything God could do to address Jacob's fears and uncertainties? You bet there was. And God did it by means of a dream. Our text records the event. *When Jacob reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending (with the idea that they're bringing Jacob's needs and requests to God) and descending (as in, returning with God's help and assurances) (Genesis 28:10-12).* But the most important feature was who was at the top of the stairway. We read, *There above it stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" (Gen. 28:13).* God identified himself with his covenant name. He is the LORD. The God of free and faithful grace. It's that God, the true God, the almighty God, the Eternal God, who says to Jacob those four most important words. God said to Jacob, *"I am with you."*

Those words made all the difference in the world to Jacob. When he woke up from his sleep, what was his reaction? *"Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it."* It's as if Jacob is saying, "Here I was, stressing over all sorts of things because I had lost sight of the fact that the Lord is here. The Lord, the Almighty, the all-glorious, the all-knowing God is at my side. What do I have to be afraid of?"

My friends, isn't the same thing true for you and me? God doesn't have to come to us in a dream. Instead, he comes to us in his Word. More specifically, he comes to us through his Son, the one whose name is Immanuel, which means what? God with us. In Christ, God is with us. Because of Christ, God is with us. Isn't that right? When God took on human flesh and stepped into our world, carrying all our sins to the cross, he erased all the things that once separated us from the Father. By his perfect life and innocent death, Jesus brought us back into fellowship with God. He made us members of God's family. We are all part of the body of Christ.

My friends, isn't that comforting, especially in light of the rather strange times we're living in? Thank God that he's not restricted to one particular place or one particular building. I know, that people sometimes come to church to feel close to God. And we certainly miss gathering together here in God's house. But the fact is, God is where his people are—wherever that is. If you're sprawled out on your living room couch with your pajamas on right now, God is with you. If you're chopping veggies that your kitchen table while you listen to this message on a laptop, God is with you. If you're sitting in a hospital bed listening to the Bible app on your phone, God is with you. Whenever and wherever God speaks to you through the words of Holy Scripture, you can say exactly what Jacob said, *"How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God."* That's what it means to know that, in his Word, the Lord is here.

And yet, if you think about it, here in the place that Jacob called Bethel, God had more to say than simply "I Am with You, Jacob." God blessed Jacob with more than just his presence. God blessed Jacob with some promises. Promises that Jacob's heart could cling to even when

his eyes could not see exactly how those promises would be fulfilled. Listen to the promises that God made to Jacob. God says, *"I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying."* (That is, the Promised Land.) He says, *"Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth."* (That is, Israel will become a great nation.) God promises, *"I'll watch over you wherever you go."* And maybe the greatest promise of all, *"All people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."* What is that but the promise of a savior? For which of Jacob's descendants could be a blessing to all mankind other than the one who would take away the sins of the entire human race?

So why did God make all those promises to Jacob? Because God wanted to keep Jacob's faith alive and growing, even when his earthly life got hard—like when his uncle Laban ripped him off for 7 years of wages, or when he had to meet up with brother Esau and was afraid he was going to lose one half of his family or the other. Or when his sons told him that his favorite son Joseph was no more. All those things were hard on Jacob. But through it all, God's promises kept Jacob's faith in God's plan for his life alive and growing.

My friends, isn't the same thing true for you and me today? Even though there are a lot of things we don't know about the future, (at least the future between now and the grave), God has still given us some promises we can cling to. For example, in his Word, God promises you, *"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you"* (Hebrews 13:5). God promises, *"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,"* says the Lord who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:10). God promises, *"When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."* (Isa. 43:2). And God promises, *In all things he works for the good of those who love him* (Romans 8:28).

Regarding that last promise, do we always see how God is working for our good, in the middle of a crisis like the one we're in now? No. But then again sometimes we do see it. Sometimes we see how God can use a crisis like this to turn our attention away from things that don't really matter, and back to things that do matter. We see it as families gather together for their own little church service in their home, or as couples sit down with a Bible to talk about their fears, and find hope in God's promises. We see it as hundreds if not thousands, go online to watch one of Mount Olive sermons for the very first time. However God plans to use this COVID crisis, we can be sure that God is going to make it work for our good and his glory. St. Paul said it so well in the epistle reading for today, didn't he? *If God is for us,* (yes, if God is with us—and in Christ, he certainly is), *then who can be against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demon, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers (including viruses and pandemics), neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:31, 37-39). My friends, there's a promise you can stake your life on. Entrust your life into the hands of God, for there is no better place to be than in the hands of a gracious, powerful, Savior God. For then you can be sure, in the words of Jesus himself, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20) God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.