

My friends, it is so good to finally stand in this pulpit and look out to see people here in our beautiful church. There was nothing lonelier than standing here preaching and being one of just a handful of people in our building.

Still, even as we gather here today, we know that things are not the same. Many things are different about our worship as we gather here in person, and some of those we love most are not able to join our physical worship gatherings because they may be at higher risk than others. Even though we know they are still joining with us spiritually and virtually, we can't help but miss their faces and their presence here with us.

In short, we are not at the end of a journey, but in the middle of one, and we still don't know quite how long and arduous that journey may be.

How appropriate then this morning that our first reading, from chapter 28 from the Book of Genesis, involves a long and challenging journey undertaken by Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob is sent on this journey by his father, who encourages him to travel far to the north to settle in lands occupied by his maternal uncle, Laban. Eventually, as you may remember, Jacob will spend years working for Laban, and will marry both Laban's older daughter Leah and his younger daughter Rachel.

But in today's reading, that is still far off in the future. Right now, Jacob is still in the very early stages of what will be a daunting trip. He is traveling all the way from Beersheba, in the southern Negev desert of modern-day Israel, far to the north into modern-day Turkey.

When we come to today's story, Jacob is probably not even a fourth of the way to his destination. He stops in what the text describes simply as a "certain place" named Luz, which is probably in what is now the Palestinian West Bank. I think the important thing to remember here is that this is not some special place or holy site where Jacob has stopped. It is simply one of many random overnight stops that Jacob is planning to make as he travels toward Haran.

And yet random stopover, like one we might make on a long road trip – this becomes the place where something amazing happens. What Jacob experiences is what biblical scholars would call a theophany – an appearance or manifestation of God. He has a vision of a ladder reaching up to heaven, with angels climbing up

and down, and then suddenly, in the words of Genesis, “The LORD stood beside him” and spoke to him. After receiving God’s message, Jacob marvels and says, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it!”

In other words, Jacob realizes that we don’t go to a place that is already holy to find God waiting there. Places become holy because we encounter God there. Indeed, he renames this location where he has stopped “Beth-El,” the house of God. Even this random stop, one of so many along a huge journey, can become a place where God dwells.

This week, I’ve reflected a great deal on this story in terms of those times when I have stood to preach in a nearly-empty church over the past few months. I think sometimes we imagine that we come to church because the church building itself is somehow a holy place where we will find God. And indeed whenever I come in this building, I love everything about it – our altar, our candles, our windows out on to the world. But, like Jacob, I’ve come to realize that this place, this St. David’s, has become holy as generations of families have come to worship here. This building becomes holy because of the people who gather here, and the presence of God in the midst of God’s community. And so last week and this week are a celebration that this building, this “certain place” in the words of Genesis, has again become most fully Beth-El, the house of God, because of God’s people gathered here.

But as I said at the beginning of this sermon, we are, like Jacob, still on the road. Between occupancy limitations and people at different levels of risk, not everyone who would like to be here in person can be. And while Brittney and I are worshipping here together today, we have decided to spend most weeks alternating our attendance, so that one of us can stay home with our young people.

Over the past few months, one of my biggest personal challenges has been seeking out the presence of God. For the past seven years, our church family has constituted the central place where I have come to feel God’s presence, so powerfully expressed in the love of everyone who gathers here.

But all of a sudden, in March, I didn’t have that central nexus for my spirituality and my relationship with God. And it was very challenging at times. I’m sure many of you have felt that same challenge over the past months.

Like Jacob in today's story, though, the past months have been a learning process where again and again I've had occasion "Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it!"

I want to share just a few of the "certain places," to use the words of Genesis, where I have felt God present with me, in hopes they may resonate with some of you, particularly those of you who may still not be able to get back to church regularly, or as regularly as you would like.

In saying this, I don't want to suggest at all that church in general is any less important or that our church in particular is any less important – being back here today is one of the greatest joys I have felt this whole year.

But at such a difficult time, our experience of God and our experience of the holy need to become bigger and deeper and wider. Because if we are open to God, God will always surprise us. In addition to God surprising Jacob in today's story, our Psalm too reflects on God's presence throughout the entirety of the universe.

"Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the underworld, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

So where are some of the places that God has surprised me over the past months?

I've found a surprising connection to God's presence in nature. In April, Chris, one of my good friends gave me one of his old digital SLR cameras and a pair of binoculars. He's quite an avid bird-watcher, and he wanted to encourage me to take up the hobby.

I have a long way to go! I think now I can identify about 8 species of Virginia birds. I know that doesn't sound like much, but it is 8 more bird species than I could have identified in March!

What's really amazing is that being aware of birds makes each walk through the park or in my neighborhood a celebration of the beauty of God's creation. In any landscape, the trees and bushes come alive with the colors and shapes and grace of our avian friends. And every time I catch a beautiful bird in my binoculars or

with my camera, it is like a tiny prayer offered up to God for this beautiful world we live in.

In fact, Brittney and I recently went to Wild Birds Unlimited and bought a squirrel-proof bird-feeder, because up to now, squirrels have outsmarted every feeder we've tried. And even watching the squirrels and their unsuccessful attempts to raid the chickadee's food touches me with the pure joy of God's creative power and the wonders of evolution.

Speaking of Brittney, I have come to feel God's presence even more keenly when I am gathered with my family. Having the kids home from school for such a long time could be very challenging, but it was also a beautiful experience – working with them on their homework, helping Brittney design a structure for their long weekdays. The other night, we sat down and watched Hamilton together on Disney+ and then Darriell spent the next week playing it over and over and learning the words to the songs. And watching her joy, her passion, her creativity – it wasn't just something good. God was there too.

Perhaps the most surprising place I have felt God over the past few months has been in the virtual environment. I've associated technology with lots of things – Office documents, video games, web browsing – but rarely, until this spring, did I associate technology with the presence of God. And yet over and over again, I have found God present through our modern means of communication.

That has of courses included our live-stream – both in terms of watching it from home and in terms of remembering that I never was really preaching to an empty church, but rather to all of you gathered around phones or computers to keep our community going.

But the virtual environment has proved essential to my spirituality in other ways as well. Most of you know that I attend 12-step groups regularly, especially one that meets over at a Baptist church on Hull Street. When our meetings suddenly stopped a few months ago because the church had closed down, it was pretty alarming. But within a few days, one of our regular members had set up a virtual video-chatroom for all of us, and in fact rather than disappearing, our group continued to grow, and even expanded to meeting twice a day. I've been able to other virtual 12-step groups, not just here, but even in northern Virginia – one

thing COVID did over the past few months. I've also continued meeting with my spiritual director through Zoom.

And I've felt God's presence in all these gatherings. Is it the same as meeting in person? Of course not. But I have still been touched been led by God's hand, to use the Psalmist's words, again and again, even in this virtual environment. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the underworld, you are there." And apparently that holds true for Zoom and Facebook and Google Meet as well.

As we worship together today and receive communion, or join in spiritual communion with each other, I hope you also can think of some of the times and places where God's presence has surprised you this spring and summer.

Let's all work and pray that we can be open to those moments and experiences in the coming week. And perhaps, just like Jacob in Genesis 28, we will be able to say, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!"