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Providence Presbyterian Church
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 19, 2026
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Genesis 28:10-19

"Where Do We Stand With God?"

At one time or another, almost all of us succumb to the urge to impress others with the people we know or the places we have been. I've met a couple famous people in my lifetime – I met Lyndon Johnson at a gala dinner and I met Sammy Davis Junior on an elevator. How about you? Have you met anyone famous or infamous?

As interesting as those encounters are, no one who could beat the name-dropping of Jacob, who managed to rub elbows with God. If the story of Jacob at Bethel weren't in the Bible, we would simply dismiss it as the ravings of a petty con artist, because Jacob seems about the least likely person to be granted the awesome privilege of encountering God in person (so to speak).

Jacob was not exactly the most upstanding man in the Middle East. In fact probably the most upstanding thing about Jacob was how quickly he was up standing to escape the scene of his latest scam, which is where we find him in today's lesson in Genesis. If Jacob was nothing else, he was daring. He conned his brother, Esau, out of his birthright by catching him at a moment of weakness, persuading Esau to trade his rights as the firstborn for a bowl of lentil soup.

Some years later, Jacob and his mother, Rebekah schemed together to dupe his father into giving him his blessing, and the entire inheritance that went with it. Jacob didn't hesitate to take advantage of Isaac's failing eyesight by masquerading as Esau, who was a very hairy man.

Jacob dressed in Esau's clothes, wrapped his forearms and neck with hairy animal skins, carried a platter of freshly barbecued lamb and goat to his father, and lowered his voice an octave to convince Isaac that he was his brother, Esau.

The plan worked. Jacob received his father's blessing, which, in the Middle East was something that once given could not be taken back. The problem was that Jacob couldn't even enjoy the fruits of his dishonest labor, because he had to make a hasty exit before Esau returned to discover this latest deception.

Thus, we find Jacob living the life of a fugitive in today's lesson. He journeyed through a desolate place on his way to Haran where his Uncle Laban lived. When he had walked until he could walk no further, he chose a likely spot to set up camp for the night.

Having little more than the clothes on his back, Jacob snuggled up to a stone which still radiated heat, to fend off the chill of the desert night. With the stone for a pillow and the stars for a blanket, Jacob dropped off into a deep sleep. That's when he dreamed the kind of dream that should have been reserved for children and saints, neither of which he was. Jacob dreamed of a ladder, actually more accurately translated as a ramp, but "ladder" is easier to picture and sounds a lot more poetic than "ramp." As an aside, I have to tell you that I spared you having to stare at my first title for this sermon – it was “Jacob, our ladder day saint”

This ladder reached from earth clear to heaven, and on this ramp were angels, messengers of God, some of whom were coming down to earth and others of whom were going up to heaven. But the ascending and descending angels were not the only thing Jacob saw in his dream. He saw God who was standing not way off at the top of the ladder or ramp but who was standing right beside Jacob.

For the Middle East, this was a radical image of God, not as detached and aloof, but as approachable and involved in life. It is astounding that God would grant such a vision, even in a dream, to a man who ought to have tossed and turned in his sleep from a guilty conscience. But that's the way the Lord works, preferring to show us how easy it is for God to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Among all our spiritual ancestors, there is hardly one who would have been chosen "most likely to succeed," in their high school annual. The underlying message here is that God enjoys the challenge of working with imperfect, error-prone, sometimes even disreputable, rascals. Which is great news for us. Whether we have rocks under our head or simply in our heads, God is accessible to each and every one of us.

Not only through Jacob's dream, but also through the life of Jesus Christ, we see that God is not content to stay detached from creation. That is not God's way. God's way is to roll up his sleeves, step down to our side, and get involved in all of life with us. God stands with us when we suffer financial catastrophe, grieve over the loss of a loved one, succumb to materialism, or worry about a failed relationship. Those are times when we perceive God's accessibility more clearly, perhaps because we are more open to God. Spiritual, emotional, and physical setbacks remind us of how dependent we really are despite all our posturing and bravado about being self-sufficient.

In the dream, the Lord promised Jacob the land upon which he slept, a family to support him in his old age, and the constant companionship of God. That was more of a bargain

than a scalawag like Jacob had any right to expect. God's promise startled him so that he immediately awoke proclaiming, "Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!" Often, God appears in unexpected places, and at the most unlikely times, a fact to which I can personally attest.

Back when I was the Pastor at Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Port Arthur, Texas, I attended a clergy retreat the presbytery sponsored every year. It was great gathering with other pastors for rest and relaxation at a camp that was very special in my heart because I served as a camp counsellor there between college graduation and seminary and where I carved the engagement ring I gave to Ellie.

During the pastor's retreat, one of my friends pulled me aside and said, "I have something to tell you and you may want to hit me for it!" I thought, "O my goodness, what have I done now?" My friend continued: "I believe God is calling you to be the next General Presbyter of our presbytery." I was stunned and was at a loss for words (something that doesn't happen often!) We talked some about it but I took it as a "one off" kind of thing.

One day after I got home from the retreat another friend called me to tell me the exact same thing. That surprised me and made me think that I maybe ought to consider applying for the position. Two days later another person called me with the same message. By that point I told God, "OK, you win. I'll apply." Six months later I was installed as the General Presbyter.

We just never know when or through whom we will encounter God. It was not a coincidence and it was not mere wishful thinking when Jacob envisioned God at a time when things were not going right. He had just alienated his brother and had departed his father in shame. The fair-haired boy had not made good, and would lead the life of an outcast for years to come.

This was the low point in Jacob's life, a time when everyone tried to distance themselves from him - everyone except one - God. In response, Jacob declared, "this is none other than the house of God," literally Beth-el, and that's just what he named it, as he anointed the stone upon which his head rested, converting it from a pillow to a pillar of the temple to be built there.

The stone was not the only thing to be converted that day. Jacob himself was converted from a deceptive shyster into an upright ancestor of our faith. Although Jacob continued to have his faults, as do all of us, he put his deceitful ways behind him and began to work for eventual reconciliation with his brother.

This story has been preserved in Genesis because it reminds us that God is accessible, accepting and available. The message of this passage is unmistakable - Whenever we worry about how we stand with God, we need to remember that God always stands with us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen