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Providence Presbyterian Church
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 3, 2025
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Genesis 28:10-17

"At Heaven's Gate"

A story is told about a pastor who was taking his first airplane trip and was unbelievably nervous. He chewed her nails, frantically flipped through magazines and clutched the cross hanging around his neck, as he awaited take off. Seated next to him was a businesswoman with lots of travelling experience. She showed no anxiety at all as she calmly read the Wall Street Journal. However, she couldn't help but notice the pastor's obvious nervousness.

Finally, when she had broken the ice with the usual get-acquainted conversation, the minister felt enough at ease to admit her fear of flying. "How come?" queried the woman. "You're a man of faith. Didn't Jesus say, 'I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth?' What do you have to fear with a promise like that?" The pastor reflected for a moment on this comforting quotation and then replied, "Yes, but what Jesus actually said was, 'Lo, I am with you always.'"

Low or high, near or far, up the ladder of life or down near the bottom, God is always with us. That was the promise in Jacob's dream: "Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land." (Genesis 28:15)

Today's lesson begins with Jacob "on the lam" from his brother Esau whom he had just tricked out of their father's blessing. But Jacob, scoundrel that he was, wasn't content with simply duping Esau out of his inheritance and becoming president of the family business. Jacob aspired to be CEO and Chairman of the Board too. So, he tricked his father, Isaac, into conferring spiritual and family leadership upon him instead of his hairy brother, Esau, by tailoring lamb's wool sleeves to imitate Esau's arms, thus becoming the first to pull the wool over someone's eyes.

Having cheated his brother out of his birthright and family position, Jacob didn't even get to enjoy the rotten fruits of his labors, because he realized that Esau wouldn't "cotton" to his trickery and would track him to the ends of the earth, which is an apt description of where Jacob ended up.

The land of Haran was about as bleak and desolate an area as anyone could imagine, and certainly was not the land of luxury to which Jacob had grown accustomed. So Jacob hastily gathered up what possessions he could carry in his backpack and headed for the wilderness of Haran. At the end of one particular day, Jacob stood atop an arid arroyo and surveyed both this desolate land and his even more barren life. Alone with the privacy of his inner turmoil, we can probably never know what thoughts might have crossed his mind, or can we?

There are many of us who have endured our own spiritual exiles and know full well the torments of that wilderness. Some of us, even now, may be in the midst of a journey through barrenness, where failing health, broken relationships, death of a loved-one, or economic setbacks have sucked the marrow out of our lives. Probably many of us know better than we'll ever admit, the kind of emptiness which must have enveloped Jacob like a shroud. That's when we look for help beyond ourselves. When the crushing weight of a broken relationship becomes more than we can bear, we seek strength to supplement our weakness.

When illness or disease jeopardizes our health, we hope for a healing power beyond what our fragile bodies can muster. When the complexities of life threaten to overwhelm us we search for wisdom which will help us outwit our confusion. When the shadow of death falls across our lives, we need the encouragement of eternal life. When financial setbacks endanger our well-being, we look for an assurance of better days ahead. When the dilemmas of the soul force us to face a bleak journey in the future, we seek a connection with the divine, but it is hard for us to know which way to turn to find that connection. That's when we can take a lesson from nature and the hawk.

When a hawk is attacked by crows or king birds, as it is occasionally, it does not make a counter-attack. It simply soars in ever-widening circles, higher and higher, until its tormentors can fly no higher and at last leave the hawk alone. Instinctively, the hawk knows what we need to learn - there is safety in altitude.

When we can soar upward into God's presence we can find comfort and safety. It's a lesson which many of us learn the hard way. That's exactly how Jacob learned it – the hard way.

Having forgotten his orthopedic pillow in his hasty retreat, Jacob pulled up a rock on which to rest his head. Even though he probably should have laid awake all night being

troubled by a guilty conscience, Jacob dropped off into a deep sleep and dreamed the kind of dream that should have been reserved for children or saints, neither of which he was.

What happened next is creatively described by Frederick Buechner in his book, Peculiar Treasures: "He dreamed that there was a ladder reaching up to heaven and that there were angels moving up and down it with golden sandals and rainbow-colored wings and that standing somewhere above it was God. And the words God spoke in the dream were not the chewing out you might have expected, but something altogether different. God told him that the land he was lying on was to belong to him and his descendants and that someday his descendants would become a great nation and a great blessing to all other nations on earth. And as if that weren't enough, God then added a personal P.S. by saying, 'Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.'"

What God did as Jacob lay upon the doorstep of heaven's gate, was to confirm several things. One was that grace, even for a con-artist like Jacob, is not something to be bought, sold or finagled. It is bestowed freely by God in spite of what we do or fail to do. God doesn't love people because of who they are, but because of who God is.

God, in a threefold commitment to Jacob, also reveals something about the divine nature of God - God is consistent, persistent and insistent. God is consistent in loving us steadfastly. Somehow God gets past all our faults and follies and stands with us no matter what. Jacob was loaded with faults and yet God consistently stood with Jacob through all his shenanigans.

God is persistent in always being accessible to us through heaven's gate, which opens to us wherever we may be, even when we are the most disconsolate. God doesn't give up on us even if we have given up on ourselves. God persistently stands ready to help us.

Finally, the Lord is insistent that we be brought back into relationship with God, no matter how great the distance may be that has grown between us and our Creator. God insists on claiming us as beloved children no matter how far we may have drifted away. God's ultimate purpose for our lives will not be thwarted.

The name John Wilkes Booth has long become synonymous with villainy, treachery, and deceit. Much has been written of him, but little has been said through the decades about his brother, Edwin, until an article by Brian McGinty entitled, "Edwin Booth: Prince of Tragedy."

Edwin's first wife, Mary Devlin, died only two years after their marriage, and his second wife, Mary McVicker, ended her years labeled, "insane." Her illness sent Edwin into bankruptcy. But surely the most painful of the tragedies that marked Edwin Booth's life was the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln by the actor's younger brother, John Wilkes Booth. Not only was Edwin a Union supporter who felt that the death of Lincoln was a tragedy for the nation, but he also felt the loss in an intensely personal way. "Where is my heaven now?" he asked, repeating a line from one of his plays, "mountains of shame are piled upon me."

In spite of his shame, he went on to become America's greatest dramatic actor of that era. But that's not all the story. Something almost unbelievably ironic happened to Edwin Booth, something stranger than fiction. One day Booth was in Jersey City, New Jersey waiting for a late night train to Philadelphia, when he saw a tall, young man, pressed by the surging crowd, lose his balance and begin to fall into the space between the platform and a moving train. Instantly, the horror-stricken actor dropped his valise and seized the trapped man by the collar and pulled him to safety. The young man recognized his rescuer from his pictures on the billboards. "That was a narrow escape, Mr. Booth," he said.

The actor would, in years to come, take great comfort in the knowledge that the person whose life he had saved was none other than Robert Todd Lincoln, the eldest son of the President his own brother had shot.

There are no circumstances sufficient to undo God's purpose for our life, because the Lord is consistent in loving us, persistent in standing with us and insistent that we will be brought back into relationship with God. When we recognize that as the nature of God, we will awaken to the fact, as did Jacob, that heaven's gate is always, always, always open for us.

Whether we have a rock under our head or in our head, our consistent, persistent insistent God awaits us with open arms. In the name of our Rock, our Redeemer, and our Resource. 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

