

The Lord Is in This Place

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

November 1, 2009



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15210
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org

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Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17).

Jacob is on his way to find a wife. His father, Isaac, says he can't marry any of the Canaanite women in the neighborhood, because God has promised his grandfather Abraham that all the nations of the world will be blessed through their family, if they stay faithful to God; but the Canaanites worship other gods and do things the one true God doesn't like. So Jacob sets out on a journey to find a wife among his mother's relatives, and one night along the way he falls asleep.

Jacob has this dream. He sees a ladder stretching all the way from earth to heaven, and angels are going up and down the ladder, as though heaven had business on earth tonight. Suddenly Yahweh himself, the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca, is standing next to Jacob. The Lord tells Jacob that the very ground he's standing on will belong to his descendants one day, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through them. "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go," the Lord says, and then he disappears.

Jacob wakes up, and looks around. "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" he says. "This place is awesome!" He really means awesome – not the way we say "awesome" all the time, but really filled with awe, terrifying, scarier than Halloween, yet wonderful and good at the same time. "This is the very gate of heaven," Jacob says. So he calls the place "Bethel," which means "house of God."

Now the thing is, this is just an ordinary place where Jacob rolled out his sleeping bag. By itself, it's nothing special. But it turns out that the Lord is in this place. You could climb a ladder all the way to heaven from right here.

Skeptics may say, "That's a nice story, but that sort of thing doesn't really happen. God doesn't just show up like that." Even believers might say, "Maybe

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God did appear to Jacob. After all, Jacob changes his name to Israel, and Moses leads the people to the Promised Land, and Joshua conquers Canaan; and even today, the land is called 'Israel' – so Jacob's dream really did come true. Still, I wonder why God never shows up like that today."

But the fact is, God does show up. God turns up all the time, in ordinary places. More often than we realize, wherever we are, the Lord is in this place.

I just finished a book called *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul*.¹ The principal author is a brain scientist who argues that, contrary to the notion that human beings are just chemical reactions walking around in a bag, as some people claim, the evidence points to the existence of a human soul that transcends our brains and bodies.

Mario Beauregard cites near death experiences, for example, where people recall things that went on in the operating room while the machines they were hooked up to showed that they were clinically dead. People born blind describe things they saw. One person saw a shoe on the hospital roof, and when someone went to check it out, sure enough, there was a shoe. We've all heard of experiences like that, and a few of us may even have had them; but Dr. Beauregard says hundreds of cases have been documented in recent years, where medical records show that the patients were clinically dead when they experienced the things they later described – which says that whatever was going on, it was not the result of ordinary brain activity.

But it isn't just near death experiences that interest Dr. Beauregard. His book is a fascinating summary of research about all kinds of religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences. The point I want to focus on today is that people who have had these experiences are often transformed. Their lives are changed in a powerful way. Beauregard says these experiences tend to awaken a deeper sense of a spiritual self, and the connection of that self to the ground of all our being. People often become more compassionate, more loving, and more interested in God, while values such as wealth and status and material possessions become much less important.

He tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl named Hope, who was dying of bone cancer. People from the Make-a-Wish Foundation came to offer her a chance to

¹Mario Beauregard & Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain* (New York: Harper-One, 2007).

enjoy something special before she died. Hope asked how many children were waiting for wishes to be granted. They said there were 155 in her part of North Carolina. "Then my wish is to raise money to grant all of their wishes," she said. So an extravaganza was organized to raise the money, but a few days before the big event took place, Hope died. In an interview taped before she died, she explained, "I just saw that God had given me a whole lot, and I had already been to Disney World and stuff. But I figured a lot of other kids hadn't."²

Dr. Beauregard says Hope's story stands in a long line of stories about people who have had a profound experience of God, or some deep sense of transcendent unity, so that their lives are transformed. They're not afraid of death any more, and they no longer live so fully for themselves. Instead, they have a new feeling of love and compassion for the people around them, and they want their lives to count for something more than just personal comfort and success.

If you ask Dr. Beauregard what triggers these spiritual transformations, besides near death experiences, he cites the work of Alister Hardy, who says they typically result from four things: prayer, meditation, natural beauty, and participation in religious worship.³ All of these have to be taken seriously, of course. The frazzled prayers of people on the fly ("Oh God, get me out of this jam!") don't do it. Showing up in church and daydreaming, or focusing on the people around you ("Why does she have *that* dress on?") doesn't do it. Just sitting in a fishing boat, or walking around the golf course, and glancing up at nature doesn't do it either. We have to meditate, pray deeply, contemplate God in the Word and the world, or truly worship God, in order to have a transforming experience of God's presence and power.

But if we do those things, the testimony of God's people for thousands of years has been, "The Lord is in this place" – even when we did not know it. Ordinary places become truly awesome. There's a ladder to heaven everywhere we go.

One test for whether we really have encountered God is the quality of our life. If we live the same old self-centered existence, clamoring for comfort and convenience in this life and afraid to face the next, chances are we have not met the Lord. Some people avoid getting close to God precisely because they don't want any life-changing experience. They're up to things God doesn't like, and

²Ibid., 246.

³Ibid., 37.

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they're not up for the things they suspect God wants them to do. Some people even come to church to keep God at a distance, as if religion were a kind of vaccination: getting exposed just a little avoids coming down with the real thing.

But when we really do get close to God, the result can be truly awesome. We become bigger people, and we find that it's good to be near to God. Jacob's story points to that. There was no one more scheming and manipulative and self-serving in the Old Testament than Jacob. He came out of the womb with his hand on the heel of his twin brother, Esau; and years later, he tricked his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that belonged to his brother. Jacob knew what he wanted and went after it. But even Jacob, after his encounter with God, promised he would tithe a tenth of everything he had if God would continue to be with him.

From biblical times to today, getting close to God has turned lives around. We don't have to wait for a near death experience. Most often we find God through deep centering prayer, and meditation, and reflecting on the beauty of nature, and in meaningful worship.

We also find God in caring for God's people. St. Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Carmelite nun and mystic, said, "The more progress you make in loving your neighbor, the greater will be your love for God. His Majesty loves us so much that he repays us for loving our neighbor by increasing our love for him in a thousand ways."⁴ So the First Letter of Peter in the New Testament says, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. ... Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (1 Peter 4:8-10).

We are stewards of God's gifts. Everything we have was lent to us by God to serve God's purposes in the world – most of which are about caring for all God's people. Much of God's work is done through the church, which is why it's so important that each of us steps up to give and share as generously as we can. And the truth is, most of us have room to grow in our giving.

This is Reformation Sunday, and it reminds us that the church is always reforming, always being made new by the power of the Holy Spirit. We see that every day in the life of Westminster, and in the lives of so many people who gather here.

⁴Quoted in Beaugard, 82.

The Lord is in this place. The Lord is here in the care we provide when anyone is sick or suffering or grieving. The Lord is here when we teach children about the love of God, and show it in the way we live. The Lord is here when we gather in small groups or classes, and the Word of God leaps off a page and into our hearts. The Lord is here when volunteers show up at SHIM or the Interfaith Hospitality Network in the South Hills, or Produce for the People in Pittsburgh, or when we build a school in Haiti, or care for street children in Malawi, or support the poor and the sick in India.

The Lord is in this place when we sing God's praises and our worship leads us to care for our neighbors, and then our caring brings us back to worship. The Lord is in this place, always reforming, always transforming God's people into a new creation. As Jacob said when we awoke from his dream and looked around, "How awesome is this place!"