

What Water?

Genesis 28:10-19

for Westminster Presbyterian Church

19 July 2026

Our second text this morning comes from Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-19

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.
This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When I was in high school, I dreamed of journalism. As such, I took up an editorial post on the yearbook staff, joined the paper as a contributor, and decided to take up poetry on behalf of the *Langiappe*, Irmo High’s arts and literary magazine. My editor for the paper criticized my use of parenthetical statements (wrongly, might I parenthetically add), and my best work for the yearbook came in the ad sales department (really just an excuse to leave campus for lunch, another critically important parenthetical). What got me some attention from our readers was a poem I wrote about, of all things, Montreat, North Carolina.

Next week some 70-odd youth from WPC will make that familiar trek up the mountain to participate in the Youth Conference. Hopefully they, too, will encounter what I found in Montreat, what I wrote about in that poem that none of you will ever read: a closeness with God unlike anything I’d known from the pews of my little church, a Spirit that blew through the conference, up the mountain and landed squarely on my head. In Montreat’s natural beauty, in the faces of my friends, and, likely to some lesser extent, in the preaching I heard, I *felt* God’s presence. Just about every time I’m at Montreat that old feeling returns. Surely, surely the Lord is in that place.

Perhaps you too have had a mountaintop experience. I was along for the ride when we took 20ish folks to Scotland in 2025 and we all sat overlooking Iona's beaches. I think I saw God there too, and saw some folks have that same experience. Montreat, Iona, perhaps for some of you Litchfield Beach, are what the Celts called "thin places" on earth, those spots where heaven and earth meet, where **we** fill the gaps and *touch* God. They are the places where God is easy to find.

It's not only thin places though, where we're likely to encounter God. In my 13 years of ministry at this church I've seen God in the valley — even as recently as this week and over and over this summer, I have *felt* God when this congregation grieved with one another, consoled one another, and showed up for one another. I've seen God in meal trains and through tears, I've seen God when folks who experienced sudden, tragic loss, found consolation through prayer and the face of a friend. I've seen God working in the hands and feet of this congregation. The feeling is not ecstatic, not like Montreat, but God's presence has been just as real to me in the valleys as I suspect it has for some of you too.

Which brings me to Jacob's ladder. Over the course of my time as an esteemed high school poet, and throughout my ministry at Westminster, I've come to suspect that it isn't the mountains and valleys that most challenge Christian living.

It's the dust of everyday life.

David Foster Wallace told the graduating class of 2005 at Kenyon University a story about fish: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the [heck] is water?'"

"The point of the fish story," Wallace told the graduates, "is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."

Most of our life is lived somewhere between the mountain and the valley. Between those moments where God is palpably present. The question for us on the plain of everyday living, then, is whether and how we come to recognize God in the everyday. For Christians in 2026 is God only a comforting Spirit, an ecstatic singular experience, or a political cudgel? Or is God something else ... the water in which we swim, the call we answer in our living, and the way we come to see the world?

Put another way: is being a Christian only about our grief and ecstasy or does it have something to do with the mundane stuff of life: bills, grocery stores, representatives, and the drive down 85?

Now I know y'all remember what Jacob's been up to in the verses preceding today's texts. Nick laid out the quarrelsome beginning last week: the second-born twin of Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob came into the world reaching for primacy. He wrestled his

hulking twin brother Esau in the womb and grabbed his heel at birth, as if trying even in infancy to win the substantial rights belonging to his brother. He wanted his father's land and his father's blessing — both Esau's by custom. He didn't win the battle in Rebecca's womb but he'd tricked Esau twice since.

Jacob got what he wanted. He deceived and manipulated his father and brother until the blessing that was first promised to Abraham was channeled through him.

And now he is on the run. When we meet Jacob in today's Scripture evening has fallen. He can go no further. On a road where he expected little, on a street with no name, in an unremarkable place, Jacob lay his head down to rest. Untroubled but tired. Neither the heights of the mountain or the depths of his brother's murderous rage. This is everyday under the blessing.

Last week Nick noted that part of the reason Scripture attends to the story of Jacob and Esau is to explain the historical animosity between the two nations the brothers came to represent. Likewise, today's Scripture serves a national agenda. The unremarkable place where Jacob had his dream would become Bethel, a place of spiritual significance for Israel. After he returned to his homeland, Jacob would build an altar there. Later, it would house the Arc of the Covenant.

But here, on this night, it is simply "a certain place." A geographic Tuesday, so to speak. Nothing is expected to happen in the place that would become Bethel, not yet. Which is what makes the text so remarkable.

Because in the midst of nothing special,
on an unimportant day,
to an unrepentant thief,

God chooses to make himself known.

Not on the mountain,
not in the valley,
not at temple,
not in the palace's walls.

Someplace, sometime, to just another someone.

We remember this text because of the ladder — or perhaps more realistically because of the song, *we are climbing Jacob's ladder, every round goes higher, higher!* But this story isn't about Jacob at all, and it's even less about our capacity to climb.

This text is about *God*,
the God who climbs *down*, lower, lower,
until he meets us in the dust of our lives, at the end of another day,
on a geographical Tuesday where nothing remarkable is happening,

except the plain fact that we are alive.

The Genesis “Jacob” cycle is only secondarily about Jacob, and then, because it’s about the blessing that draws us in, it’s about us too.

But only because the God who bound himself to Jacob has, through Jacob, through Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Spirit, bound himself to us too.

Did you catch that detail in the text? God hauls down that stairwell and *stands next* to earthbound Jacob. God binds himself to the trickster patriarch, telling Jacob that divinity will accompany him until the call is complete. In the valleys. On the mountain. And in all the in between.

An uninteresting place. Another day. And here is God, standing right next to Jacob, as present as on the mountain when he held back Abraham’s hand, as near as Isaac’s grief on learning of Sarah’s death.

This text is about God’s nearness in extraordinary and quotidian. It’s about the God who has rejected some transcendent other place in favor of this place. It’s not about ladders we climb to meet God. It is about response: do we have the eyes to see that God stands alongside us even on another ordinary day?

This text is about water.

The dream is not an escape upward, pointing to a ladder from which we can transcend the world, it is a grounding vision of who we are because it animates the presence of the God who called us to being and accompanies us. The one who willingly descends — over and over and over — even to us.

God gave Jacob what he could neither steal nor win: the divine presence. And in the midst of our lives, God offers us the same.

Wallace continued on in his address to the graduates, “I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience [...] The point is that petty, frustrating [stuff] is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in.”

What is Christianity in the every day?

How can we experience God in the dust of the daily?

We can learn to look.

We've been told God is with us, and occasionally the sensation is too strong to ignore. The rest of the time the seeing is up to us — we are called to notice what God is doing and where God is going and join in that work. It's ours to cultivate the eyes of Christian faith — to choose what, or more likely who, we see. And, like Jesus on the road, to respond accordingly.

God descends to us whether we like it or not. Jacob had no control in his dream! God claims us and promises us presence — that is what we proclaim each time we baptize an infant here, “you should be called a child of God *and so you are*...I am with you always *to the end of the age*.” Our response to that grace is a vision exam. It's learning to see, learning to feel, learning to become disciples in the everyday, frustrating, funny, tragic moments that make up our lives.

That's partially why we say that open minds open hearts here at Westminster. Because God has opened us up, shown us the water in which we swim, the plain on which we stand, and now it is ours to open our hearts to God's work, to decenter ourselves, to look around.

In his dream, Jacob learned to *see*. He chose when he woke up to find God in the dust. God's presence became his orienting reality. It should for us, too. We can't let a news channel or a pundit choose how we see, we can't let history, our learned biases choose for us, we can't let “the way it has always been” dictate our living.

But we can choose the ladder.
We can choose to see the God who stands next to me,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit next to you,
and by the migrant on the side of 85,
and the unhoused addict downtown,
and by the politician of whom we are leery,
and by each and every person encountered in between.

We can choose to see the water,
which just might give us some clarity on what to do with our wild, precious lives, on how to spend our money and cast our vote
and care for our neighbors, the strangers, and our kin.

God promised that through Jacob the whole world would be blessed. Jacob's blessing was not his to hoard, it was for each of us. But it doesn't end with us.

How can we be bearers of the blessing if we do not see God in everyday moments of our living, if we do not actually *live* like God is present with us on the way to work and at the grocery store and in our everyday lives? How can we see God if we limit God to our valleys or our mountains?

Even a dusty plain can be God's house, that's what Jacob learned. Even a geographical Tuesday. The story of our God is a story of descent. God greets Abraham and walks with

Jacob. God climbs down the ladder to light up Isaiah's prophecies and inspires foreigner Cyrus to rescue the Israelites. God comes to us in the form of a lowly child born to a lowlier woman. God descends and descends until God breathes his last...and finally, until God tends the garden once again, only this time outside an empty tomb. But even that is not the end.

God comes to the church as Spirit, as Wind, as Fire, as Breath.
And God changes the way we see everything.
Wake up! What will we choose to see?

Jacob thought he had stopped for the night in an ordinary place. But when he woke, he discovered that the ordinary place was full of God. The surprise of the text is not that heaven is somewhere above us. The surprise is that God is already here. Here in the mountains. Here in the valleys. Here in hospital rooms. Here in grocery stores. Here on the drive down 85. Here on a geographical Tuesday. God is not waiting at the top of a ladder for us to climb. God has already come down. Can you see it? It doesn't take a fancy education or a fat wallet. It takes a willingness to adjust your vision, to break out of habits, and to allow yourself to be changed.

Surely the Lord is in this place. Does it matter?

— *Leigh Stuckey*