

Surely the Lord is in This Place—And Now We Know It!

How Awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God . . . and this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s house”—Genesis, 28:17, 22

There Jacob built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother—Genesis 35:7

Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”—John 1:51

First Scripture Lesson: Genesis 28:10-17

Every family has its story. This is the story of how God’s family came to be.

God called Abraham and Sarah, saying to them: “Go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.”

But as with any good story, the unexpected happens: complications in the plot, twists and turns. It’s many years—many many years—before Abraham and Sarah have a child—so many that they begin to doubt God’s promises. But God is still with them.

And when that child—Isaac—finally arrives . . . well, his story has its unexpected turns too. He and his wife, Rebecca, have fraternal twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and . . . as in many families, well, have you ever heard of “sibling rivalry”? Hmm. Yeah, That’s Esau and Jacob—even when they’re adults.

Jacob tricks Isaac, thereby stealing Esau’s birthright—and that’s the last straw: Esau is ready to kill Jacob; so Jacob, at his mother’s prompting—her warning, really—runs for his life, heads for the hills: she tells him to go to his Uncle’s Laban’s.

But even as Jacob runs, God is with him. At the end of his first day on the road, Jacob stops “at a certain place” to sleep. And as he sleeps, he has a dream, and in that dream, God comes to him to repeat and renew the promises made to Abraham and Sarah.

Jacob’s ladder—Genesis Chapter 28 verses 10-17. Listen now for God’s Word:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 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.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

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; 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.

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."

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."

Second Scripture Lesson: Genesis 28: 18-22

"Surely the Lord is in this place! This is none other than the house of God . . ." When he wakes up, Jacob knows that this dream matters. It tells him who God is, and who he (Jacob) is. And more than that it tells him who he is called to be in the future—and even more than that, that God will be with him throughout.

So Jacob knows that this place—this place where he had his dream—is a holy place, a sacred place. The Lord is in this place—he did not know that before but he knows it now.

So he sets a stone as a pillar—and consecrates it with oil—so that he and others will always know, always remember, that God is in this place and God will meet us here. And he calls the place Beth-el which means "God's house." The story continues, Genesis Chapter 28, listen now for God's Word to us:

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 . . . Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Sermon

This church, like a family, has its stories: tried and true, told and re-told stories.

This church has some storytellers whose memories go back a long way, go baack a long, *long* way.

From pants falling down, to noses gushing blood (on Good Friday no less), to the organ dying—just dying—right in the middle of the service with *all* the combined choirs lined up and ready to sing—believe me this church has its stories.

And by the way: I can't tell you how good it is for us *all* to be together, to have *all* of you *all* back there—you look great and sound even better. Thank you.

This church, like a family, has its stories: tried and true, told and re-told stories. The very walls themselves—the portraits that hang on the walls in Heritage Hall—all tell their stories.

Hugh Ivan Evans—beloved pastor here for over 30 years from 1923 to 1955—loved to tell the story of how this building was finally *finished* in 1926; for seven years prior the congregation had been worshipping at various places all over Dayton—Memorial Hall, the National Cash Register Schoolhouse, the YWCA—wandering around “like the lost tribe of Israel,” during what Evans called “the wilderness years.” But finally it *opened* with a big celebration—you can see the newspaper accounts down in Heritage Hall.

Finished and opened, but not yet paid for: the members have made pledges to pay for it—to pay off the bank loan—over the next 20 years. And then—boom! 1929—The Great Depression. And people can't pay their pledges. And so a lot of them stop coming to church. In Hugh Ivan Evans' words: “they were suffering, afraid and ashamed.

“But that's precisely why they needed to be in church,” he goes on, “to know the love of God, So I cancelled all the pledges, just ripped em up, and told them to come back to church—just come back—if they could pay a dollar a month for the building, great! But no matter: just come back to this place where God was waiting for them.

And they did—and the building was paid off in two years.

Surely the Lord is in this place! This is none other than the house of God . . . and these stones, set up as pillars, are God's house.”

If you remember Jacob's story, he ends up staying with his Uncle Laban *for twenty years!* During which time, he marries Rachel—that story has its twists and turns too—starts a family, and becomes quite prosperous; so prosperous, in fact, that he incurs the envy and enmity of his Uncle Laban, so much so that once again, he has to run for his life —“And Jacob deceived Laban, in that he did not tell him he intended to leave”—only this time he “runs” with his entire retinue: wives, children livestock, flocks, camels.

And the story of this second journey also has its twists and turns, including an all-night wrestling match with God, and an unexpected encounter with his long-estranged brother, Esau, and *his* entire retinue.

And where does his second journey end? You guessed it—right back at that “certain place” where Jacob dreamt of the ladder, and which he called “Bethel,” the house of God. Listen for God’s Word:

God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “let us go that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

And the story continues:

Jacob built that altar and renamed “Bethel,” “El-bethel,” which means “God is in God’s house” because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

*And God then appeared to Jacob **again** and blessed him. God said to him, “No longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.”*

Every family has its story. This is the story of how God’s family came to be—And because we are all part of God’s family—and all of our stories are part of that larger story.

One such story came in the mail to me recently—in the form of a letter, a letter from a woman who is not a member of this church, but who recently had lunch with one of our members who was telling her about our ID ministry. And that conversation prompted this woman to write me this letter:

Dear Pastor Baker,

I would like to share with you a fond memory I have of Westminster Presbyterian Church. This happened in the 1980’s. On my lunch hour, I always walked past your Church.

It was a sad day for me: I had just received news that my mom required serious transplant surgery. I was walking by Westminster and heard the organ playing beautiful music. I felt as if it was an invitation to come inside the church. I walked in, sat down, and listened to the organ.

At that moment, tears poured down my face. I was so sad. I cannot remember what the organist was playing. I am not sure if I knew the song.

I had prayed all day for my mom, and I realized that I was also praying for a family member who was about to lose one of their loved ones. I asked God, “What do I pray for in this situation?”

The organist had stopped playing and was walking down into the pews. I am not sure whether he was leaving or not. Apparently, he saw me crying [because] he turned around and went back up to the organ and began to play again.

[It was then that] I received my answer from the Holy Spirit telling me to pray for God's will. I sat there in awe feeling thankful and blessed. My heart was no longer heavy. I realized that I must continue to hold on to my faith in God. I began to cry again because I felt relieved.

Thank you for your church. It was a blessing to me.

And she closes the letter this way:

When I met a member of your Church for lunch recently, she was telling me about the ID Ministry—she was so excited about the Ministry and the persons they were helping.

Pastor Baker, I remembered at that moment how Westminster was a blessing to me and I want to be a blessing to this Ministry. I am enclosing a donation to the ID Ministry. I can never repay Westminster for the blessing it gave me. Please accept this check as a token of my appreciation. [pick up check]

I want to thank you and your members for the good work that you are doing. Thank you again. Blessings, [and it's signed]

And I know that many of you—so many, and many, many others—in similar ways and in different ways—have experienced the love of God here. I know I have.

This is none other than the house of God . . . Surely the Lord is in *this* place. I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

We've been blessed with this church, so that we can be a blessing, not just for one another but for the whole community of Dayton and the world beyond. And because we now know that the Lord is in this place, we have to take care of it.

This building is almost 100 years old—96 to be exact; its doors officially opened on September 12, 1926. So the weekend of September 12th and 13th, 2026 will be a big one in the life of this church, a big celebration.

And part of that celebration will be to renovate this building for the next one hundred years so that—like Jacob rededicating Bethel as El-Beth-el on his return trip—we can rededicate this building and ourselves to witnessing to God's love for the world through Jesus Christ through the figurative pillars of this church (1) worship and music, (2) education, (3) mission, and (4) caring.

Those four pillars of this church were recognized and named in our Ministry Master Plan, which the session approved in 2019. And now, as the next step in that planning process, our session has called together a Centennial Task Force to lead us as we plan for the next 100 years of ministry here.

So *I'm* not going to finish this sermon today—*we're* going to finish it together. With God's grace, we will finish it together. The hymn we're about to sing is part of the sermon—it expresses our shared commitment to be a blessing here in this place.

And even then this sermon won't be finished, the commissioning that follows that hymn is also part of the sermon: it recognizes the Centennial Task Force as those called to lead us through this process of renovation and rededication for next four years.

Really, we're not going to finish this sermon until at least September 13, 2026 when we celebrate the centennial anniversary of this building. And I can't tell you how good it will be for us all to be together on that day—we will look great, and we will sound even better!

There will no doubt be some complications, some unexpected twists and turns along the way—every good story has them. But God will be with us.

All our stories—as part of God's larger story—tell us not only what happened in the past, but who we are in the present and more than that, who we are called to be in the future, and even more than that, that God is with us.

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God . . . and these stones, set up as pillars, are God's house." Surely the Lord is in *this* place—God is in God's house and now we know it!

All praise be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

