

July 19, 16A (Genesis 28:10-19a)

Sometimes we don't see what's right in front of us.

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue

A few years ago a group of clergy friends and I were at our general synod in Cleveland. We went to the breakfast buffet at our hotel and ran into more friends there. Soon, we were pushing the bounds of our table.

Next to us was a group of small tables with a Reserved sign on top. We asked the waiter if we could pull one of them over so our friends could join us. He said he thought the party that was coming would have enough space, so that was fine.

So for the next half hour we ate breakfast, talked about synod, and caught up. We were having such a good conversation that we barely noticed the small group that came and sat next to us at the reserved table.

I'll get back to that story, but first our story from Genesis. Jacob has been sent out on a journey across unfamiliar places—his father has told him to find a wife. He finds himself out in the wilderness as the sun is going down. He takes a rock for a pillow and falls asleep in a place he never wanted to be. He dreams of a ladder so big it rises from the earth to the heavens, and he receives promises from God.

When Jacob wakes up, he says, “Surely God is in this place . . . and I did not know it.”

Back at the breakfast buffet, the people at the table next to us stood to leave. A few minutes later, the waiter came up to us and said, “Do you know who that was?”

We all said no.

“It was Aretha Franklin. She stays here all the time and loves the breakfast here.” We were sure he was joking. He wasn't. “No, really—that was her, along with her security team. She always stops by here on her way back to Detroit.”

We all laughed at ourselves. Surely Aretha was in this place and we did not know it!

The point isn't that Aretha Franklin is God. But this experience does tell me something about my ability to see God in unexpected places. I like to think I'm perceptive, but seriously: I sat next to Aretha Franklin at breakfast without realizing it. Maybe it's not too much of a stretch to say that I might also miss God's presence in my daily life.

Even Jacob, one of the biblical patriarchs, missed God. Of course it's challenging for most of us to recognize that God is in our midst, working and transforming the world.

The challenge is learning how to really open ourselves up to God's presence in our lives. God is always with us, always working in our midst. And I believe that sometimes God is waiting for us to take notice and to get to work alongside God. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the capacity to experience God's presence in our daily life. It's learning to find that God is indeed in this place, and in every other place to which we go.

And then it's about going a step further. After we come to understand that God is with us everywhere—in our joys and our sorrows, in our familiar places and our wildernesses, in both the exciting and the mundane—something incredible happens. We stop being afraid and start looking toward all the amazing things God is calling us to.

My guess is that Jacob loves his home. He probably does not want to leave what is comfortable and safe. And yet, if he wants the blessings that have been prepared for him, he has to. He has to go out into the wilderness. He has to take risks. He has to dare to move toward a future that is unclear.

But in the wilderness he learns that he does not have to do these things alone. God is with him, even in the most unexpected places. He just has to open himself up enough to know it.

How will you open yourself up to God, even in unexpected places? And once you know that God will be with you, even in those unexpected places, what will you do next? When you know that you are not alone, a whole new world is opened up to you.

As I write this, we are many weeks deep into a quarantine. We are learning how to be the church in new ways. As I look forward to the publication date of this piece, I wonder whether the church doors will be open again. I wonder if we will be able to sing. I wonder how we will celebrate the sacraments.

I do not know. But I know that, however the church is gathered, God will be there too. I pray that I am able to recognize that and to give that presence the R-E-S-P-E-C-T that it deserves.