



# KALAMAZOO FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Sermons

Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!

Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8: 18-25

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I am a parent, as are many of you. Really anyone who has spent a significant amount of time around very young people knows all about developmental stages and the hope and despair they engender. Especially when they are very young, kids go through stages of development that seem endless in the moment, and also strangely, quick as a blink of an eye. Some stages are more fun than others. Learning to talk-- with it's adorably mispronounced words is a pretty fun stage. Separation anxiety, when the parent can't leave the room without tears, not so much fun. At the moment at my house, we are going through a stage of resisting authority and pressing the boundaries. There are strong disagreements when directions are given and sometimes when it is time to brush teeth, a little person might shout back "no." Psychologists of early childhood development promise that these stages are all a normal stop on the way to a healthy adulthood. For the parents, it is all about trusting that this too will pass and that there is some guiding principal at work. Kids grow up and ultimately, parenting is an optimistic enterprise. We believe in the potential of these little people, so we deal with the tantrums and the stages and we exercise a hopeful trust in whatever comes next. Parenting is about the long view, and we trust, that we are headed somewhere.

Our Genesis reading dives into some pretty heady family dynamics. The story is not about parenting, but it is about trust. Jacob is in a pretty bad place. He comes

from a pretty dysfunctional family and with the help of this mother, has just tricked his older brother Esau out of his inheritance. Rumor has it that Esau is planning to kill him for it. Officially, Jacob is off to a new territory to look for a wife, but it is also pretty clear that after his deceit, he is fleeing for his life and being forced to leave everything he knows behind. Instead of reaping the benefits of his stolen blessing, he is being forced into exile. He is in a pretty desperate position. Somewhere along the way, he stops for the night, putting a stone from the place under his head and falls asleep. In his dream, Jacob is shown a ladder that connects heaven to earth with angels moving back and forth between the realms of heaven and earth. God appears and promises Jacob that even though everything seems to be going horribly now, God has not forgotten him. He will have descendants and land. “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Jacob wakes from his dream, no longer desperate. He has been given an assurance that God is with him despite his immediate despair. “Surely the Lord is in this place...and I did not know it.”

Whether it is parenting little people or fleeing from our murderous twin, we all have to make a decision about the way we think the world works. Are we alone in the universe? Or do we trust that there is a plan? Is the world developing in accordance with God’s plan or is the divine order out of balance? When our political world is in upheaval, does that mean that we are lost or destined to be overturned ourselves? Is this universe a place we can trust? Is there an order and reason to our lives or is it all meaninglessness? Another way of asking all this is to ask, is God really with us?

About a decade ago, a friend gave me the first George R.R. Martin novel in the Game of Thrones fantasy. I read the first one and then put the series away. It wasn't for me. It was too dark, too bleak. Too cynical. If you've seen the HBO series you know what I am talking about. The story is compelling, but it is also bleak. Heroes die. Goodness doesn't get you anywhere but power and strength does. What little humor there is is black and while you can hope for redemption, I wouldn't place any bets on it. Having said all that, it is a really compelling story. I want to know what happens next just as much as the next person. But it isn't a world I want to live in. Fans of the series will defend it saying that it is just brutally realistic, that is how things would happen in a medieval world. This just is the way it would play out. They have a very cynical reading of human nature and of power and the world that stems from that reading is a pretty awful place especially for common people. One might even describe the resulting world as hellish.

Compare that with Harry Potter. Another fantastical land filled with a very real struggle. Unlike other children's stories, the stakes in Harry Potter are very real. People die. There is real evil and very dangerous. Harry is literally fighting to survive and to save those he loves from destruction, slavery and death. But while the struggle is real and consuming, the world is also filled with love and magic and mystery. Yes, evil has real power, but so does love. So does sacrifice and friendship. There is an optimism despite the suffering. There is refuge and joy and strength even in the midst of great suffering and pain. In the end, the Harry Potter teaches us that love is real, that hope is real, that there is something more powerful than death and evil and it is revealed through personal sacrifice, holding

on to hope, and belief and trust in those you love. Famously, J.K. Rowling intentionally wrote the Harry Potter series as Christian allegory to help her think through her own thoughts on the Christian teachings of love and fidelity and sacrifice. I like to imagine J.K. Rowling trying to peer into the mind of God through her inventions of Harry & Ron & Hermione.

So much of human life is trying to peer behind the curtain, trying to figure out what sort of a universe we live in. Is it an ordered one? Is there really meaning behind life? When I think about the love and promise developing in my children, it is easy to affirm that yes, there is a plan. With the concreteness of children and developmental stages, I can see proof of the divine at work in the world. But what about the bigger things that don't come with easy observation? Is God in this place? There is this French philosopher, Jean Luc Nancy, that I've read a great deal of and with whom I will not bore you. But at the center of his approach to thinking about the world is to center it in the mind's eye as an orb resting in the immenseness of space. Alone, without borders. Savable only by the people who exist on it. His is an existentialism that answers, firmly, no, there is no outside anything coming to save us. It is us and us alone and if we cease to exist, that will be a tragedy only for us. This cold way of seeing the world has a certain utility, but it is also meaningless.

And that meaninglessness can strike to the heart of us when we aren't careful. It can work its way into our hearts and convince us that we are alone in all this. Perhaps this is especially true when you are fleeing for your life. When you are being chased by your own bad decisions as Jacob is. I think it is especially hard

to affirm a good and gracious world when you are caught in a nightmare of trauma or hardship that isn't particularly of your own making. When you are simply caught in the desperation of a particularly bad season in life. Suffering doesn't seem to have a purpose or a point and life itself seems pointless and to be made of needless suffering. In those time and in those places, can we see God? Is God in this place?

Consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us... We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we are saved... Paul here is trying to give us a glimpse into God's universe. He is trying to weave the story of our world in a way that teaches us what it means to live here. It is not a cynical, Game of Thrones world where power is the only means of achieving rest or safety. Nor is it a childish world where nothing is ever truly wrong and the stakes are low. Paul is trying to show us that in God's world, suffering is real but so is redemption. So is hope. Yes, things are hard and suffering is part of our human experience. And the Christian response to suffering is prayer and beyond prayer it is this inward groaning. All of creation is groaning toward the redemption of our world. It is as if we can almost see it, almost taste, just around the corner. Even while suffering is real, the whole of creation is on tip toes, waiting for redemption to be revealed.

Paul here is offering us a glimpse of God's world, but he does it with some pretty confusing language. What does it mean that we are waiting for adoption? For the redemption of our bodies? I think what he is trying to say is that the church is both here now and also waiting for the real church to emerge. We are like children, living through stages of development. We are the young child, born and growing, but not yet fully developed into a mature adulthood. And like a parent, we wait and trust that this stage will pass and that we will be more fully brought into maturity in Christ. It isn't a perfect metaphor, but I think it works. We've learned after all, to trust that children grow up and for the most part, they all find a way to be potty trained and to sleep in their own beds at night. They all learn to soothe themselves after falls and scraped knees even knowing that those things still hurt. At the center of Paul's theology is this affirmation of both "now and not yet." The Kingdom of God is here, right now and also, not yet.... We can see the redemption of our world around us, and also, not yet. God is not done here. There is so much more yet to come. In the epic of our universe, the Lord is Surely in this place and also, the Lord is not fully revealed yet. Both are true.

It matters, after all, what sort of universe you believe we live in. It matters a lot. After all, we all find ourselves, at one time or another, backed up against a wall of suffering. If you live in a cynical world where suffering happens without meaning then you might as well hurt another for your advantage. In the game of thrones you win or you die. And the cycle of violence goes unabated. Or if you aren't the sort for violence, then you are met with the meaninglessness of your hurt and the hurt of others. If however, you choose compassion and love and see suffering as part of the divine order redeemed through Christ, then you see hope

underlying it all. What is more, you see yourself as instrumental in that redemption. You become part of the chain of grace that reaches out and saves others even while you yourself are in need of saving.

Did you see the news report from Panama City Beach in Fl in early July? A family of four was swept up by a riptide and were struggling to keep their heads above water in suddenly tumultuous part of the ocean. A couple of would be rescuers came to help and found themselves caught in the same current and near to drowning. In the end, 10 people ended up stranded in sight of shore, but unable to get there. A police boat was sent for, but it was clear that those in danger didn't have time to wait for a boat. In a matter of minutes, over 80 people formed a human chain while two very strong swimmers used boogie boards to pass those drowning down the human chain all the way back to shore. It is pretty amazing. There is video you can google. In a matter of minutes dozens of strangers mobilized and saved the lives of almost a dozen people. It means something to save a life, to be part of the human chain. Something deep within us calls out to be part of that redemption. That is the world that God calls us to live in. One in which we get to pass one another along the chain of grace, all of us part of God's redemption.