

When I worked at Hartman Center retreat center – the summer church camp for the UCC conference I grew up in – we’d have a staff meeting each week on Saturday after all the campers had been picked up and before we’d all be cut loose to do whatever it was 20 somethings could do with 24 hours of free time and a fresh pay check before having to be back for a full week of work the next day. At the staff meetings it was always hot – there weren’t really any air conditioned spaces at camp. We were always tired – our director would always remind us “for *you* it’s week six, but for the campers

it's week one!", and so we had to embody that the whole week with our only breaks being two hours each day. We were always eager to get going – every week we were all tied tightly to the actual physical space of the camp because, even with a two hour break the camp was remote enough there weren't many places you could go to do anything meaningful with your time. We were always a little on edge – because the staff meeting was really the most meaningful time each week our director had to be able to give us feedback on the job we were

doing from week to week, and the feedback wasn't always fun to hear.

But now, 20 years later, I couldn't tell you a single thing we talked about at any of those staff meetings. I don't even remember any of the feedback I got and I was there for three summers.

But I can remember who was on staff with me each summer. I can remember their faces and their names and how their laughs sounded. I can remember that one summer we all fought each week to be there first, so we could sit on our director's hammock which was the most

comfortable seating since we did the meetings in his back yard.

But above everything else I can remember a practice our director always started every meeting with – and it’s something I *still* carry with me today. He’d ask us about our “God moments” from the week we were just ending. Before feedback, before housekeeping, before making plans for the week ahead we talked about our God moments.

Like the year a young man named Andrew made it to the top of the mountain hike while I was his counselor that week – he’d never made it before

and as a kid who was bigger than everyone else hadn't had the confidence that he could. He bought all the post cards from the church office that week with the picture of that mountain, drew a little stick figure on the top of each one with "that's me" pointing to it, and he sent them to everyone he knew back home.

Or the where a whole camp of junior high kids had split down the middle (for what I can't even remember), but who came back together at our urging to talk it out – the 7 boys saying their piece

and the 7 girls saying theirs – in one of my first truly restorative restoration circles.

Or so many others I haven't remembered the details of, but had an impact nonetheless.

Even if we didn't look forward to our staff meetings overall, we all spent the week looking forward to sharing our God moments. And having that practice in place for staff meetings meant we were on the lookout for God moments all week leading up to it.

Today's text from Genesis is an incredible God moment.

We often focus on Jacob here and his individual journey, and that's a worthy reflection. On an individual level this story truly is a story of redemption for a person who most might even say didn't even deserve it. God meets Jacob, after Jacob has lied and deceived and stolen himself into isolation with nothing left to his name but his staff and the clothes on his back... but I want to focus on how those hearing the story so many generations later, even we as hearers of it today, can find God in real time from Jacob's ladder.

Today's story is the beginning of Jacob's redemption – but it is also a story meant to challenge the power of empire.

Throughout this passage the narrative arc mentions “the place” of Bethel. This is where Jacob lies his head on the rock and sees the ladder with God and God's messengers. Where Jacob says, “Surely God was in this place, and I had not perceived it.” And that *place* is important.

The name, Bethel, closely resembles the Hebrew words for “the house of God.” The bible mentions Bethel more than any other place except

for Jerusalem. Bethel is in the center of Israel. At one point, the book of Judges tells us the ark of the covenant resides there. Important people from our sacred stories are connected to Bethel like Deborah, Samuel, Jeroboam, Elijah, Elisha, and the prophet Amos. When the Kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms – the northern Kingdom and Judah to the south – Bethel remained an incredibly important worship site for the northern kingdom.

For people living in exile in Babylon this place couldn't be any more different from the place the Babylonians – the powerful people of empire – said

Marduk (their God of all Gods) resided. In Babylon's capital city there was a large stone pyramid with steps on all sides, where the Babylonians believed the gods ascended and descended to and from earth.

Think "Tower of Babel"... the ordinary Hebrew word for Babylon was Babel.

This story tells those countless children of God who came after Jacob that God is not centrally located in the seat of power (the capitol city of Babylon) and God is not favoring the people with

the most power and influence in the world (the Babylonians).

God is centrally located in the place where heaven and earth meet. In the place where God moments happen. With the people who most need God's presence.

In this instance that place is Bethel – a small town in the middle of a small nation called Israel. In this instance that person is Jacob – a flawed and ungrateful man, who *still* doesn't seem to quite get it even after this vision, but who will continue to

grow and to seek God becoming a father of our faith tradition.

If you want to find God I promise it won't be where the empires of this age, or any age, tell you God will be found.

Might does not make right. Perfect rule following isn't what sanctifies a person or what gives the worth in God's eyes. God's power doesn't align with human power.

Jacob did not command God to come to the place where he was – God *found* Jacob. And God cannot be kept out of any place that God wants or

needs to go... including human hearts. With the rise of Christian nationalism in our midst this might sound like radical or politically charged preaching but that's seeing it backward.

Because our oldest stories, all the way through the stories of Jesus and his life, through to Paul and his teachings throughout the early church, and all the way to present day... they all affirm this idea.

Our current climate would have you believe that you have to align with a certain ideal of patriotism to be a faithful person. Our current climate would have you believe that questioning those in power is

akin to blasphemy. But empires don't represent God and never have.

God resides in small places. In ordinary places. In unexpected places that the world misses. God resides in the hearts of ordinary people, *with* the people we'd least expect. Like mothers in Palestine wondering if their babies will survive. Like parents crossing international borders without documentation – hoping they can find a better life for their children because empires have built fences too high for them to cross (both physically and institutionally). Like addicts recovering one day at a

time giving sobriety every ounce of strength they have. Like folks who have lost hope due to mental health afflictions, wondering if tomorrow is even worth it. Like those who are unhoused, or living in fear of being outed or persecuted for their sexual orientation or gender identity.

And so many more who the empires would tell us are not only unworthy of our attention – but need to be eradicated from our presence.

Because God, the sacred stories tell us, is all about Grace. All about showing up in God moments, on God's time, in God's way. We can't fall for the lie

that God's power aligns with human power. Instead we need to look for God in the small, in the ordinary, in the unexpected places and people the world misses. In the God moments. Amen.