

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HOLY PLACE

Genesis 28:10-19a

October 11, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

**O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.**

Where can I go from your spirit?

**Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

That's what David said in Psalm 139 -- King David the Shepherd. **Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?** And I love the psalms. Really, I do. I read them and pray them as much as I can. But that one has always been one of my favorites.

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Used to make me think of my mom. Because she did that, you know. She knew when I sat down and when I got up. And somehow she knew what I was up to -- even what I was thinking.

Oh, where can I go from my mother? I thought. Where can I run to that she will not find me?

Because she always did, you know. She would find me. Like a bloodhound on the trail of a runaway convict, she would find me wherever I went. And not just when I was trying to hide from either. But she would find when I was frightened in the middle of a storm. Or when I had fallen big brother's bike and scraped my knees and my elbows there in the cinders at Ferguson Pond. So it is a bit sentimental, I guess -- Psalm 139. It brings back old memories... the kind that warm your heart and put a smile on your face.

Or, at least, it *did* till a few weeks ago. And then it wasn't my mom I was trying to escape. It was something horrible. Evil and cruel. And I was terrified. I mean, I feared for my life!

It happened here at the church on a Thursday night sometime around ten o'clock. I was sitting there at my desk trying to work on a sermon for Sunday. And a choir was singing softly on the stereo, right along with the crickets outside my window. And all was well. I was deep, deep, deep in thought, writing my sermon. And all was right with the world. And my mind was at peace. But it all changed in a split second. Because I looked up and there was a bat flying straight at my head! And it's hard to jump up in the air from a sitting position, but I did. And I tried to run, but my feet got tangled in the phone line first and then in the computer cords. And I nearly fell down.

And when I finally broke free I ran out of the study and down the hall, and the thing was right on my tail! Biggest bat I've ever seen! It looked like a big brown eagle coming at me. A big, brown, ugly eagle. Only it was bigger, I think. It reminded me of one of those dinosaur birds in *Jurassic Park*. A *pterodactyl*, I think. Isn't that what they call them? And it was coming after me like a heat-seeking missile! So I ran down the hall. And I didn't even know I could run like that! I kept

thinking, "I'm running faster than I *can*!" And then I turned around and tried to shoo the thing away by running straight at it and waving my arms. And all the while screaming like a little girl. (I had a doctor's appointment a few days later. And she could see that I had been traumatized. "What's wrong with your shoulder?" she said. So I told her the whole story.... And you know, it's kind of embarrassing when you tell your doctor how you were injured and she can't stop laughing!)

So ... anyway ... here I was chasing this enormous, man-eating bat. And just when I thought I could get away, the thing turned around and came right at me again. So I screamed and ran back the other way. And I could have sworn I heard it humming that awful music from Star Wars that starts playing every time Darth Vader enters the picture. And it went on and on. Back and forth. Screaming and humming. It was awful! Just awful!

But somehow I managed to shoo the beast into one of the Sunday School rooms. (The one that connects with the Assembly Room upstairs). And I slammed the

door shut. But the door between the two rooms was still open, so it came around the other side. And I just barely got *that* door shut before it got me! And I abandoned my sermon for the night and went home, shaking like a leaf. ✘ I slept with the light on that night. Isn't that terrible? A grown man with the light on and the covers pulled up over his head? And every time I started to drift off, I thought sure the thing had found me and was swooping down on me just like a Stealth Bomber. ✘

The next morning, I came over here and told Linda all about it. And I told her I had it trapped inside the assembly room and it couldn't get out. And she said, "Oh no! Ginger's up there!"

"Up where?" I said. "In the assembly room," she said. "She's cleaning up there." And she was. Poor Ginger was in the same room as the killer bat! And the worst part of it was she didn't shut the door behind her! So I went straight to the study and shut *my* door. ✘ And after a bit, Ginger came to the door and said, "I found it!" And she had the thing in a box -- a long slender box that a roll of paper (table cloth) had come

in. And she brought the box out in the hall! And she said, "Do you want to see it?"

"No."

And I said, "What are you going to do with it?" She said, "Take it outside and let it out!" Can you believe it? I said, "No, you can't do that. It'll come back in and get me!" So we got some tape. And we taped the box shut. And we put it out with the garbage. Linda took a marker and wrote, **DO NOT OPEN! BAT INSIDE!**, on the side of the box. And that was the end of it...Ginger is my hero, now. She rescued me from the awful beast.

Sometime after that, Benny Warden came along. And he said, "Tom, what would you have done if there had been a bat *and* a mouse up here!?" ✘ (I wouldn't even want to think about that.)

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

**even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

Jacob did the same thing, you know. He ran as far and as fast as he could. But not from a bat or a mouse or even a bear! It was far worse than that. Because the one chasing him was his own flesh and blood -- his twin brother Esau, the first born of Jacob. And he meant to kill him, "If it's the last thing I do," he said, "I'll see him dead." Because Jacob was a trickster and a cheater, a *slicker* some people would call him. Cheated his own brother out of the most important thing he could ever receive. And that was the blessing of Isaac their father ... and all of that went with it.

By that time, remember, Isaac was almost blind. And Jacob took advantage of him. Because he was his mother's favorite. And it was her idea. So Jacob pretended to be his brother Esau, while Esau was out in the field getting food for his father. And Isaac gave Jacob the blessing that belonged to Esau. And, mind you, in those days people thought words had great meaning and power. And once a thing like that had been pronounced on someone, you couldn't undo it.

You just couldn't un-bless someone who'd been blessed. And when Esau found out he was angry and hurt. And he wanted to kill his brother for what he had done.

So Jacob ran. He ran for his life. Because he knew Esau wanted him dead ... and that he would come after him like a bat out of ... well, like a bat out of here! And Jacob may have been cunning and slick with all kinds of tricks up his sleeve, but he was no match for Esau! So he ran faster and farther than he knew he could.

And when night came, he stopped to rest for the night. And the only thing he could find for a pillow that night was a rock. So he laid his head on a rock. And somehow he was able to sleep! Most people wouldn't sleep a wink if some big, angry brute was hot on their trail and ready to kill them. But Jacob slept all night. With the hardest, lumpiest pillow you could imagine.

And while he was sleeping, he had a dream. And in the dream he could see a ladder. And it reached up from the ground all the way into heaven. And the

angels of God were climbing up and down the ladder, as if heaven and earth were connected somehow. And then it wasn't just the angels he saw. For the Lord was there, too. He was right there beside him! And he gave him his blessing -- the very same blessing he had given to Abraham and Isaac, that he would have more descendants than anyone could imagine. And that the earth and everyone in it would be blessed because of him and all his descendants...

And God said, "Jacob, I will be with you wherever you go. And I will stay with you until everything I have promised is done." And Jacob woke up. And he took the rock he had used for a pillow and stood it up as a marker and anointed it. He poured oil over the rock and dedicated it to God. And he named that place Bethel, which means "House of God." It means, "God is here in this Holy place."

And years later, when Esau finally ran into his brother he ran. He ran straight for that old trickster Jacob. And Esau threw his arms around him and hugged him and kissed him. And Jacob said, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."

And God was there. Jacob's dream had come true. Heaven and earth really were connected. Because God was with him. God was there in that holy place.

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Or where can I flee from your presence?

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if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

You know what that means? It means **this is a place where heaven touches the earth**. Not just here in this building, mind you, but **wherever you are**. No matter where you are in your life. No matter where you are in your health or your faith or your relationships with the people around you ... **GOD IS THERE! And he gives you his word (just as surely as he gave his word to Jacob) that he will be with you. And because he is with you, you can face the past, and the future, and everything in between, and know in your heart that nothing -- I**

mean NOTHING will ever be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! ✘

Well ... there is a young woman named Susan who felt that she was being chased down and attacked by a terrible beast. And in a way, I think she was. But the name of the beast was blindness. And when it happened her whole world crumbled. And she was depressed and discouraged. And her husband Mark was just heartbroken, I think. Because he loved her so much and wanted to help her. And he did. He did.... Inch by inch he helped her climb out of that pit. And he helped her learn the skills she needed to cope with her blindness. And he did every thing he could to help his wife Susan regain her confidence and strength as a person.

And after several months, I think, Susan did feel more confident. She even felt that she wanted to go back to work. And so, every day, Mark would drive her to work. And he'd walk her into the office, make sure she was settled, and then leave and go to his base on the other side of town. Because Mark was an officer in the military. And at the end of the day he would come

back and pick Susan up again her office. And he did this for several weeks, even though it made it impossible for him to get to work on time and do all that he was expected to do.

And he dreaded doing it, but he had to. He had to tell her that he couldn't keep doing what he had been doing every day. And Susan was scared. "But I can't ride the bus," she said. "I'm blind. How am I going to know how many stairs there are? Or which path to take? I feel like you're abandoning me," she said.

And he was just crushed. He promised her he'd do whatever it took to help her until she felt confident enough to ride the bus by herself. He helped her with directions and getting her bearings. And he helped her learn the stairs and the hallways. And finally, after several more weeks, Susan was confident. She could do it. So, Mark went to his base and she went to her job.

Monday morning she got on the bus. And she went to work and came home at the end of the day. And she did it without a flaw. It was perfect. And then Friday

came. And Susan made her way onto the bus. And as she went to pay her fare, the bus driver said, “Ma’am, you sure are lucky!” And Susan said, “Are you talking to me?” And the bus driver said, “Yeah... it must feel good to be cared for so much.” And she said, “I don’t know what you mean.”

And the bus driver said, “Well, you know, every morning when I drop you off at your stop, as soon as those doors open, I can see that man standing over there at the corner. And he watches you, ma’am. I mean, as soon as you step off the bus, his eyes are on you. I think he's some kind of military man because he wears a uniform. And his eyes follow you as you walk across the parking lot there. And he never takes his eyes off you,” he said. “He watches you all the way up those stairs. And when your hand touches that door knob, his eyes are on you. Never takes an eye off of you till you open that door and go inside. And once that door closes, he stands straight and tall, like a sentinel. And he salutes you. And then he blows you a kiss.”

And Susan couldn’t hold back. The tears were just pouring down her face. Because she had no idea that her husband was there or that he was watching her in his love.

Sound familiar? That’s how it is with you. Someone is watching. Someone is there. Wherever you go. Wherever you are in your life, God is there. God is with you. And because God is with you ... well, you know what it says: **“I can do all things ... I can do *all things through him who strengthens me.*”**

**O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.**

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even there your hand shall lead me,
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This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEN, OBLSB

