

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

A number of weeks ago, we reflected on Abraham and Paul's beautiful phrase that Abraham was "hoping against hope." We considered what it means to trust God's promises when we can't yet see how they will unfold. Today's readings return us to that same landscape of faith, though from a different direction. They invite us to ask: What makes such hope possible in the first place? What allows a person to keep trusting, even when life feels uncertain, complicated, or unfinished?

The answer that emerges from our readings is surprisingly simple. Hope becomes possible when we discover that God is already present. We hope because we are not alone. We hope because God's Spirit is already at work in places we may not yet recognize. We hope because God's love accompanies us long before we become aware of it.

Jacob discovers this truth in one of the most vulnerable moments of his life. We often remember Jacob as the great patriarch, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Yet that isn't who he is when today's story begins. He is a man on the run. His relationship with his brother has been shattered. His future is uncertain. He has left everything familiar behind. As night falls, he comes to what the text simply calls "a certain place." There is nothing particularly remarkable about it. There is no temple, no altar, no indication that this location is holy. There is only a weary traveler, a stone for a pillow, and the darkness of the wilderness.

During the night Jacob dreams. He sees a stairway reaching between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending upon it. Most importantly, he hears God speak words of promise. God assures him that he is not abandoned. God

will remain with him. God will guide him. God will bring him home. When Jacob awakens, he declares “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.” God did not suddenly arrive during the night. The place itself has not changed. The wilderness remains the wilderness. The stone remains the stone. What changes is Jacob’s awareness. He awakens to a reality that was already there. The Lord is in this place. The holy was hidden within the ordinary. Heaven was closer than he imagined.

I suspect many of us have experienced moments like that. Sometimes they come during periods of grief or moments of great joy. Sometimes they emerge during illness or uncertainty. Sometimes they arrive unexpectedly in conversation, prayer, worship, or simply while walking along the shoreline. We suddenly realize that God has been present all along. Looking back, we can see traces of grace that we missed in the moment. We recognize that we have been accompanied even through seasons when we felt alone.

This is precisely the insight that fills Psalm 139. The psalmist reflects on the mystery of God’s presence and discovers that there is nowhere, nowhere beyond God’s reach. “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” (v. 7) The question itself becomes an act of wonder. The psalmist imagines traveling to the heights of heaven, descending into the depths of Sheol, crossing to the farthest limits of the sea, even entering the darkness itself. Yet every possibility leads to the same discovery: God is already there.

This psalm has comforted generations of believers because it speaks to a deep longing within the human heart. We all wonder at times whether God sees us. We wonder whether God knows what we are carrying. We wonder whether God

understands our fears, our disappointments, our hopes, and our struggles. The psalmist answers these questions with extraordinary tenderness. God knows when we sit down and when we rise up. God is acquainted with all our ways. Even before a word is on our tongue, God knows it completely.

There's a lovely line from the Quran, "Indeed, it is We who created humankind and fully know what their souls whisper to them, and We are closer to them than their jugular vein." (Surah Qaf 50:16) I love this line! But I learned that not everyone reads it with the comfort I did. Some find this terrifying. It depends on your view of God. For some this speaks of a wrathful God with a killer surveillance system. For some it is the language of intimacy from a God of steadfast love and mercy. It is the language of a God who knows and loves us completely, and delights in us. The psalmist isn't describing a distant ruler keeping records. He's describing a loving presence that accompanies us every step of the way.

Perhaps that's why the psalm concludes with, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts." The psalmist is secure in God's love for them. The psalmist doesn't ask God to search other people. He doesn't ask God to evaluate his enemies. He doesn't ask God to identify all the flaws in the world around him. Instead, he invites God to search his own heart.

That prayer becomes especially important when we turn to today's gospel reading. These weeping and gnashing of teeth passages in Matthew are very difficult to hear, aren't they? He uses this phrase no less than six times. Renowned scholar Ulrich Luz argues that Matthew is writing for a church living in the tension between the resurrection and the delayed return of Christ. The Romans have

destroyed the Temple and scattered the Jewish population. The Christians, Jewish and Gentile, are being persecuted. And so, the community needs reassurance that evil, injustice, and unfaithfulness will not have the final word. Judgment functions as a promise that God will ultimately set things right. The parable of the wheat and the weeds has often been interpreted as a story about separating good people from bad people. The challenge with that interpretation is that human beings have a remarkable tendency to place themselves among the wheat. We become very confident in identifying the weeds. We become experts at locating the faults and failures of others. We draw lines between insiders and outsiders, between the righteous and the unrighteous, between those who belong and those who do not. Yet experience teaches us something different. Life is rarely that simple. Human beings are far more complicated than such categories allow.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (sowl·zhuh·neet·sn) understood this. Reflecting on his years in the Soviet prison camps, he wrote, “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.” That language of something being “disclosed” or “revealed” echoes Jacob’s awakening at Bethel. Jacob awakens and discovers God was already present. Solzhenitsyn awakens and discovers that the deepest struggle isn’t between “us” and “them” but within every human heart. The psalmist then prays, “Search me, O God, and know my heart.”

Every one of us carries generosity and selfishness, courage and fear, compassion and resentment. Every one of us contains places where God’s grace is flourishing and places where the Spirit is still healing and transforming. The field

that Jesus describes may be larger than we often imagine. It may include the landscape of our own souls.

When we hear the parable in this way, it becomes less about identifying weeds in someone else's field and more about allowing God to cultivate our own hearts. The invitation is not to become judges of one another, or even to fear judgement day. The invitation is to become participants in God's transforming work within us.

This interpretation also helps us hear Jesus' surprising instruction. The servants want immediate action. They want certainty. They want clear separation. They want to pull up the weeds right away. Yet the farmer counsels patience. Growth is still occurring. The roots are still developing. The harvest has not yet arrived. Most of us would prefer quick transformation. We would like spiritual growth to happen as efficiently as possible. We would like old wounds to heal quickly. We would like habits to change immediately. We would like wisdom to arrive fully formed. Yet the Spirit often works more like a gardener than an engineer. Growth unfolds gradually. Healing unfolds gradually. Transformation unfolds gradually. God works with a patience that is so much greater than our own.

That same patience appears in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul describes creation itself as groaning while it waits for redemption. Human beings groan. Creation groans. The whole world waits with eager longing for God's future. Paul does not deny the reality of suffering. He recognizes it fully. Yet he also speaks of hope. Once again, we encounter that familiar theme of hoping against hope. We continue hoping because God's Spirit is already present within the groaning. We

continue hoping because God has not abandoned creation. We continue hoping because the story is still unfolding.

Many years ago, Celtic Christians spoke about “thin places” where the distance between heaven and earth seemed especially small. Pilgrims would travel to these locations hoping to encounter God in a deeper way. Phil and I were privileged to visit one of those places last month. Lindisfarne, the Holy Island established by the venerable Bede. Even with what seemed like a vast noisy crowd around us, it was still a thin place. Yet Jacob’s experience suggests something even more expansive. The whole world is filled with places where heaven touches earth. Every ordinary moment carries the possibility of becoming Bethel. Every ordinary place may become a place of encounter.

The challenge is not that God is absent. The challenge is that we don’t always recognize God’s presence. Sometimes we discover it only in hindsight. We look back and realize that God was carrying us through a difficult season. We recognize grace that was hidden from our view. We become aware that we were accompanied by a love larger than ourselves. That awareness changes how we see the world. It changes how we see one another. It even changes how we see ourselves.

When we know that God is present everywhere, we can approach others with greater humility. When we know that God is still cultivating every human heart, we become less interested in judging and more interested in blessing. When we know that the Spirit continues working within us, we become more patient with our own unfinishedness.

Perhaps that is where today's readings ultimately lead us: toward wonder, toward trust, toward a deeper awareness of the God who is already here. Like

Jacob, we awaken to discover that God has been present all along. Like the psalmist, we find that there is nowhere beyond the reach of divine love. Like Paul, we learn to hope even as creation groans. And like the disciples, we come to understand that God is patiently cultivating the field of our hearts. Each of our readings this morning invites us to trust the ongoing work of God's Spirit.

And so perhaps our prayer this week can be the prayer that concludes Psalm 139. "Search me, O God, and know my heart." Search me and show me where your grace is growing. Search me and reveal where your healing is needed. Search me and help me recognize your presence in this place.

For the Lord is in this place. The Lord is in every place. And wherever God's Spirit is present, healing, restoration, and transformation continue to unfold.

Amen.