

## ***“An Awesome Place!”***

### **Genesis 28:10-18**

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night,  
because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place,  
he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth,  
the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God  
were ascending and descending on it.

And the LORD stood beside him and said,

“I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father  
and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie  
I will give to you and to your offspring;  
and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,  
and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east  
and to the north and to the south;  
and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you  
and in your offspring.

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,  
and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you  
until I have done what I have promised you.”

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

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

And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place!  
This is none other than the house of God,  
and this is the gate of heaven.”

So Jacob rose early in the morning,  
and he took the stone that he had put under his head  
and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

He called that place Bethel;  
but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

## **An Awesome Place!**

Genesis 28:10-18

July 19, 2026

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

*Following today worship service in Canton, I will be traveling to the Dailey Ridge Presbyterian Church to lead worship, baptize a child, ordain a new elder, and officiate at the Lord Supper. After the service we will gather for a festive potluck in celebration of the church's 50th anniversary of their reopening.*

### **I.**

In 1957 a professor at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade, published a fairly remarkable book entitled, The Sacred and The Profane. A Romanian by birth, Eliade was an historian of religion, a fiction writer, and a philosopher. At the end of the day the panentheist in me would like to understand God as existing within *all* of creation while also transcending it. That said, my own *practical* experience of life, as well as 32 years of real life parish ministry, have left me very much in agreement with Eliade that human reality can be divided into two realms. One realm is the *sacred*, or those parts of reality which are transcendent, eternal, and full of meaning. The other realm, less an opposite and more of the remainder, is the *profane*. Which is to say the mundane, secular, and ordinary aspects of everyday life.

### **II.**

However, as Jacob discovered in today's scripture reading from Genesis 28, seldom are these two realms so clearly or cleanly delineated. While there are plenty of places, where the presence of God is undeniably obvious and evident, like the Grand Canyon or a freshly hayed field on a hot summer evening with the sun an orange ball set low in the sky, more often than not the sacred must be stumbled upon. Less a vision of divine visitation and more of a discovery what has always been there to find. Like a hidden gem, the sacred is usually pretty hard to pick out, at least initially, amidst the jumble of the profane which gets piled upon us by simply going through our day. When we do have the good fortune to discover the sacred, it becomes a touchstone for our lives, in whatever measure great or small.

### III.

Usually the sense of the sacred is fleeting. It comes to us in short bursts rather than as a sustained realization. Which is why we humans endeavor so to ritualize the moment that it might be remembered and revisited. Most interestingly, when we recall those moments when we were in the presence of the divine we come to realize that such sacredness is actually around us all the time and never not within our own selves.

An important measure of the spiritual journey and of a maturing faith is one's ability to see more and more of the world as sacred rather than profane, and to recognize the line between the two is exceedingly thin. For Eliade, the religious life consisted of four core aspects: sacred space and the world, sacred time and myth, the sacredness of nature and cosmic religion, and, finally, human existence and what he called "the consecrated life."

### IV.

Eliade believed that for religious individuals space is not uniform. By experiencing manifestations of the divine, called *hierophanies*, particular locations come to be set apart from the chaotic, meaningless "profane" world. Which is exactly the case with Jacob in today's text. These sacred sites act as a cosmic center or bridge between heaven and earth, exemplified by Jacob's ladder, which provide people a reference point that serves to orient their lives.

Just like with space, Eliade similarly divides time. Profane time is just the passing, chronological, one way, everyday ticking of the clock. Sacred time, however, is reversible. He believed that our various religious festivals and rituals allow us to step out of mundane time to re-enact the mythical moment of creation. These myths serve not as mere stories, but as true models for living and blueprints for human behavior.

### V.

For those with a religious mind, so says Eliade, nature is never just biology, dirt, or landscapes. It is what he called, "the transparent creation of the divine." He believed that the cosmos serves as a living revelation, and religious humans view natural phenomena (like the moon's cycles or the seasons) as symbolic of the divine rhythms of life, death, and resurrection.

Eliade concludes that for the religious person everyday biological acts like eating, sleeping, and working carry sacred weight because they match divine forms. This is unlike the modern secular person who, Eliade believed, identifies as detached from religious frameworks and, so, lives a completely profane existence, stripping life of these deeper cosmic dimensions and meanings.

## VI.

In today's reading we find Jacob fleeing his angry brother Esau and stopping to sleep on the road to Haran. Using a rock for a pillow, he dreamed of a stairway or ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending. Following the covenant God made with his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, God stood at the top of the ladder promising Jacob land, countless descendants, and the blessing of a constant divine protection and presence. Jacob's experience is what Eliade would call a *hierophany*, an experience of the manifestation of the Divine, which became the next chapter in origin story (or creation myth) of how the people of Israel came to be. Suddenly, as if lifting a veil, this experience revealed to Jacob the sacredness of the place and space upon which he had stumbled. A random spot to simply lay his head one night out in the middle of nowhere became for Jacob "the transparent creation of the divine." Jacob named the place, Bethel, which means "house of God." For him, it was an *awesome* place, and the gate of heaven.

## VII.

Today it is my great privilege and pleasure to help lift up, celebrate, and extol the amazing accomplishment that is the Dailey Ridge Presbyterian Church on, this, the occasion of the 50th anniversary of their reopening on July 4th 1976. If ever there was a random spot out in the middle of nowhere which is "the transparent creation of the divine," *this* is such a sacred place and, more importantly, *these* are its sacred people. In a way that would delight Mircea Eliade, today we come together to ritually remember and reenact the origin story, or creation myth, of this tribe of God's children known, collectively, as the Dailey Ridge Presbyterian Church.

## **VIII.**

Founded in 1852 by a group of Scottish settlers the congregation first gathered for worship in their homes, then built the current church the following year. The small church flourished until World War II when the population declined. In 1953 the church closed, with its fate left in the hands of Edgar Elliott, a member and farmer who owned the land adjacent to the church. Much later, the Presbytery of NNY realized the building belonged to them, though they had no idea what to do with it.

In 1976, as a bicentennial project, local residents brought the church back to life. A lot of hard labor went toward fixing broken windows, patching plaster, and applying new paint. Under the guidance and hands-on direction of the, then, Executive Presbyter, Rev. Richard E. Ploth, the church re-opened for its second life on July 4, 1976 with a congregation of over 50 excited parishioners. Apparently, Rev. Ploth, was a “crazy,” jovial, loving guy in well-worn jeans arriving on a motorcycle, who continued leading worship until a pastor could be found.

## **IX.**

Eventually, Rev. William Mundell, a full-time math teacher at Potsdam High, was convinced Dailey Ridge was the place for him! Several years later Rev. Jack M. Wells, the much beloved, former pastor in Canton, was convinced to come out of retirement to preach at Dailey Ridge and to build a new congregation. Jack reasoned the only way Dailey Ridge could be an active church was to have a separate building more functional than the present “out house.” So, a mountainous sized goal was set with only a handful of parishioners to see it through.

With a loan from the Presbytery of NNY, and a man sent with a mission from God who did not know the meaning of the words “fail” or “you’re nuts,” the present fellowship hall was built in 1984. Jack laughingly called it the “Piecemeal Palace” because it was put together as money, materials, and labor were donated piece by piece. It became the house that Jack built and once again-- with running water, kitchen, bathrooms, and a dining room--the congregation grew.

## **X.**

After Jack Wells retired (again) God once more sent an ordained Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Janice P Fife, who led the congregation for many years. After Jan retired and the church was blessed with another Pastor, the Rev Michael O. Sedore, for the next 16 years. From 1976 to 2002, the Dailey Ridge Church had ordained pastors when many other churches were looking to fill their pulpits. In 2018, Rev. Sedore retired. Once again, and to this day, the church has continued to thrive because of a vital and committed congregation. Recently, the Church has been served primarily by two lay pastors, Helen Langford and Laurinda Stockwell.

The church remains in its original state. It has no electricity and still heats with wood stoves; just like it did in 1853. Stepping into this small country church is like stepping back into the late 1800s. Not much has changed... same pump organ, same pews, same pulpit and the same God who blesses the congregation of today as He has done though all these the years.

## **XI.**

The story of the Dailey Ridge Presbyterian Church is both rare and nothing short of remarkable. Particularly when we realize this is a story which is still being written. The most impressive aspect of this story is the people who have comprised this congregation for the past 50 years. They have worked and worshipped together in the face of *incredibly* strong headwinds. The DR church is a walking, talking, working, worshiping, and living miracle of faith. The congregation is testament to the truth that when God is in a place we need not fret about pomposity, grandeur, towering spires, or deep pockets. All one needs is a rock upon which to lay one's head and upon which one's faith might be built.

For the past 50 years the Daily Ridge Presbyterian Church has been a rock set out in the middle of nowhere which God has sustained so that those who find their way there/here might stumble upon manifestations of the divine presence which has dwelt in that/this awesome place and become a touchstone of faith, a gate of heaven, and the house of God for generation after generation.

## **XII.**

For those who might read the story of Jacob's Ladder and dismiss it as a mere dream, the Dailey Ridge Presbyterian Church bears proof that even in this day and age we, ourselves, might yet discover and abide in the realm of the *sacred*. In those aspects of reality which are transcendent, eternal, and full of meaning. For the past 50 years the Dailey Ridge Church and her people have borne witness to the existence of a place not just of historical value, but what Eliade understood to be a sacred site which acts as a cosmic center and bridge between heaven and earth. A bridge which has served as a reference point that serves to orient its people in their lives.

It also has been a place where a small but mighty band of people have come together to create community, care for their neighbors, and make real the Good News of Jesus Christ. Well done good and faithful servants! Happy Anniversary! Amen!