

Young Jacob in today's reading from Genesis is a self-made man. He cheats his brother out of his birth right and his blessing, and is now haring off to another region to scout out marriage prospects. He's not one to look to God for guidance. So he goes to sleep in a non-descript part of the desert and uses a rock for a pillow. He discovers something he not only wasn't looking for—but was nothing like he expected.

*So--- "Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night. 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, "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!"*

How many times is the Lord in places where we thought he couldn't be. Places where WE didn't see God? Places that we thought were as far from God as anyplace we'd seen.

I seemed to come upon God everywhere when I was growing up—in the woods, by the sea, in my pets--- it seemed like even my waves of teen-aged angst were full of the glory of deep feeling—love unrequited, waves of fierce protectiveness for my sister and brother—the normal places we all feel God's presence. I'm sure you remember.

But have you ever encountered God in a place where it really startled you?

I am – not fond—of cities. I've had to live in them for the past 25 years or so—I've lived in New York City, Chicago, Phoenix, and Little Rock. I'm so jaded with cities now that I don't expect to find a friendly face in any city—much less God. I know in my head that God is everywhere, but when confronted by noise, pollution, horns and chaos—God is harder to discern.

I was 22 when I went to live in New York City. My hometown had one light at the time, and it was so safe that when I was 4, I walked from our house in Topsham to Bowdoin College in Brunswick with my best friend. I'm not

saying my mom wasn't furious about that fearless 4-year-old trek, but I was safe.

But at 22, a trek to NYC held no familiar landmarks, no stars to steer by. I spent a few weeks being recognizing that sleeping by darkness was a thing of the past, that tall buildings can become wind tunnels, and that the noise in the city never, ever lets up.

One day—while looking for a particularly obscure audition address—I happened onto Wall Street. Now—all I'd seen of Wall Street were images in television and movies of people screaming and waving tickets on the stock exchange.

THIS Wall Street contained winding narrow streets—like the kind you see in Europe—and the roads were paved with cobblestones. The traffic noise didn't penetrate fully into these tight streets, because not many cars attempted to navigate them. All was quiet. Like a church cloister. I walked slowly, tears in my eyes, and felt calmer than I had in months. God was there. I felt a presence beside me as I walked the streets, a presence that said: I am here with you. Even when things seem too big, too dangerous, and too noisy—I am here.

Sometimes our ideas about where we will brush against God are set in stone, like Jacob's stone pillow. He went to sleep convinced of where God should be, but was awaked by a new dream of God that allowed his eyes in his heart to discover that "Surely the Lord is in this place--- and I didn't know it."

I've never forgotten Wall Street. MY Wall Street. All I have to do is close my eyes, wherever I am, and I'm back there.

I believe these God places are all around us, if only we have eyes to see them, and not a stone for a pillow.

I gave up acting when I went to Seminary when I was 29. I'd met and married a person who became ordained to the priesthood, and we began a life linked to various churches. Our daughter joined us.

I expected to find God in the church, and I often did. I was too busy to look very many other places. The church can keep a person occupied.

I ran Altar Guilds, directed choirs, taught Christian Education, developed curriculum, cleaned up, patched up, shored up various people and places, and saw the front of the church from every seat in the house.

I caught glimpses of God in a melody here or there. Saw glory in peonies in bloom on the church lawn.

Then—at the advanced age of 50 I went back on stage. It was a mostly LDS—Mormon—stage company. We were committed to the show, I made Mormon friends. I answered lots of questions about my experience of God and they answered my questions about their experiences of God. It was... interesting.

Each night we would put aside our differences to tell a tale of love and betrayal. I had forgotten the electricity between the performers and an audience—how we all became fused in the storytelling.

One night, my daughter came. She said it was “surreal” to see me onstage. “You seemed to belong there,” she said. She looked puzzled, like she never expected to see me in this unfamiliar place—doing something that *she* loved, but didn’t realize I also did.

And me? I never expected to be so overjoyed that she was seeing more of the real me—and not just seeing mom, taxi driver, counsellor.

Don’t get me wrong—I love all these things—but for someone to encounter a suddenly bigger version me, in a different place—made me light up with delight.

I wonder if the same thing happens with God?

I wonder if God is joyful when we see experience something about him that’s unexpected. Some of our ideas about God may be set in stone—but we happens when our experiences awaken us to a view of God that’s bigger and more bewildering and than we’d ever imagined. I wonder if God is delighted?

Not that God doesn't appreciate being as a Father to us—any more that I don't appreciate being Zoe's mom—though that's the hardly the entirety of me.

But how exciting it must be for the God when we experience different facets of God, see God in unexpected places, feel God doing unexpected things. I bet it's surreal.

So surreal that we say, "*God is in this place, too—Who'd have thought it?*"

And God is pleased.

Amen.