**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

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“A Summer Hike: Sauntering”

Text: Genesis 28:10-17

Over the course of the next few weeks, the sermons are going to focus on a theme of a summer hike. One of the things I hope will result from these sermons is that you will find a moment to take such a hike. It can be as rugged or as easy as you choose. Columbus is a great location for such hikes. We are a short drive to the Hoosier National Forest where you can completely unplug from all life’s stresses and be surrounded by the beauty of God’s creation. We are near to several state parks, including Brown County. There are easy hikes to the east and west with Touch the Earth Nature Preserve to our west and Anderson Falls to our east. But your hike doesn’t have to be that structured. You might take a walk around your neighborhood, or maybe just a walk into the back yard. The goal is to simply find those places of solace that offer unexpected and important gifts.

In her newly released book, “Somehow: Thoughts on Love” Anne Lamott begins by quoting her husband. He is fond of saying, “Eighty percent of everything that is true and beautiful can be experienced on any ten-minute walk.” Now, I not going to quibble over his percentages. I feel confident that he made up both the eighty percent and the ten-minute numbers. But I think there is a lot of truth in his statement. The things that are true and beautiful are always near at hand. Love, friendship, kindness, beauty, encouragement, peace, joy hope…all these things are near at hand. A simple walk can help us find these good things which are all around us.

As we think about a summer hike, I want to begin with the environmentalist and naturalist John Muir. He was a great lover of the creation, often walking long distances, camping outside, and documenting the beauty that was all around him. But I was surprised to learn that he did not like the word “hike.” He did not consider his walks to be hikes. Instead, he encouraged people to saunter.

He once told a friend that in the Middle Ages, people would go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land. It was considered a great honor and still to this day in portions of Europe, the well-established trails that people traveled remain visible and in use. When these pilgrims would come to a village, the local people would ask them where they were going and they would reply, “A la sainte terre” meaning “to the Holy Land.” These pilgrims became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. So based upon this understanding of walking to the Holy Land, John Muir advised people not to go on a hike, but to go on a saunter. To do so is to travel with the expectation that whether intentionally or unintentionally, our journey will take us to a holy place.

That will be our starting point today. We are on a journey. That journey may only take us ten minutes from our home, but along the way, we will be surprised to find our feet standing on holy ground, to look around and realize, “God is present here.” God meets us in those holy places.

That is why I wanted to begin this sermon series with the scripture we heard this morning. It is one of many stories we might point to about finding holy ground in unexpected places. This particular story picks up right after Jacob has stolen his brother’s birthright. The two brothers had been rivals from the beginning. Even before they were born, they were fighting in the womb. In childhood, they were shown to be quite different from one another.

But the birthright that should have gone to the older brother, Esau, was stolen by his younger brother. Jacob tricked his father into believing that he was Esau, and due to his poor eyesight, he was fooled. He gave the blessing that should have gone to Esau to Jacob instead.

When Esau learns of this he is furious. For the sake of his father’s failing health, he doesn’t want to do anything at that moment. But he goes so far as to say to himself that when his father passes away, he will kill his brother.

Even the contemporary reader is not surprised that Esau is so angry and wants to get vengeance. When Jacob learns of this, he is advised by both of his parents to flee. Perhaps a bit of distance and some time will ease the anger. So that is the basis for Jacob’s journey. He is leaving home, likely a bit reluctantly because it means leaving his ailing parents behind. He is leaving to put some distance between him and his brother. Fortunately, he has a final destination. He is going to his uncle’s home where he will find safety.

But on that first day, Jacob goes as far as possible. The Bible says he traveled until the sun had set. I suspect many of us have made such a journey. In order to get as far as possible toward your destination, you traveled until the point of exhaustion. You maybe went a bit farther than you intended, but you traveled as long as possible before stopping.

When Jacob could go no further, he stopped for the night. He hadn’t made it to a town. There was no inn in sight. This was not a city, not a place with a name. It was just a place. It could be any place. But for the night, it would be his rest stop. He made the best of the situation, gathering some rocks to make a pillow and then fell asleep exhausted from his long journey.

And in that place without a name, he had a dream. He saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending. God came and stood beside him and gave him a word of promise. The place where he was resting would be his home. Not just for him, but for generations to come. This would be a home.

When he awoke, he remembered the dream and the promise and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.” He discovered that this barren place in the wilderness was in fact, a place where God dwelt.

When he got up the next morning, he took the rock that had been his pillow and made a marker to indicate this spot. He named it Bethel, or more appropriately, Beth-El. Beth being the Hebrew word for home, and El being a name for God. This was God’s home. God could be found in that holy place.

I find myself wondering what purpose this story served for future generations. Certainly, the promise that this would be their home was something they would remember and cherish. But I think there is something even more profound. It is a reminder that holy ground is all around us. Even in places that seem very mundane God is there. It is a lesson that we have to learn over and over again throughout our lives. It is a delight to visit Notre Dame, to walk the streets of Jerusalem, to tour the Vatican or any number of places we might call holy. But the unexpected nature of Jacob’s discover is that holy places are all around us and God may meet us anywhere. Every moment is more than a walk or a hike, it is to saunter, to take a step into a new place where we might encounter the gifts that God has planted all around us.

In the book, “We Should Not Be Friends,” Will Schwalbe tells about his lifelong friend Chris Maxey who opened a school on an isolated island to teach youth about the gifts this place has to offer. One of the things they do with the students is take them on a two-day adventure along the shore. Each youth is given one small portion of the shoreline, far from the others, and they remain there alone for two days. They have to create their own shelter and entertainment and just deal with being alone for that time. They have no cell phones, nothing but themselves and the land around them.

What might be ironic to many is that this exercise is a highlight for those who attend. They discover a love for their own little place. As Maxey put it, “The Island School is about learning to be present where you are, and to appreciate not just this special place but *every* place---the whole planet.” Essentially they are learning to fall in love with that particular place, but in so doing, they become able to love all that is around them. And because they love that place, they want to do everything they can to save it for others.

That is what strikes me about Jacob’s experience in the wilderness. I find myself returning to his words at the conclusion of his dream saying, “How awesome is this place!” He has found something he didn’t know he was looking for. And there is joy in that discovery.

I suspect that years later, the exact location of this dream had been lost. In all likelihood there were probably conflicting statements about where it was. But the exact location was never the point. It wasn’t about being able to go to that exact spot. The greater point is that holy places are all around us; God is meeting us over and over again in unexpected moments and in unexpected places.

Several years ago I went for a retreat at a monastery outside of Albuquerque. It is a beautiful, isolated place. There was plenty of time for quiet reflection, for prayer, for meditation, for all the things that nourish one’s soul. But one afternoon, I went for a walk. There was no particular destination in mind. But as I walked through the desert scrub, I came upon a stool far from the monastery. I sat down and just relaxed. The Sandia mountains were to my east. The setting sun to my west. I just sat and watched the beauty of the sunset.

When I walked back to the retreat center, I made a mental note of where that stool was located. Later that night I returned by flashlight. I found the stool and sat there enjoying the stars and picking out constellations. In the distance I heard coyotes howling. I enjoyed the autumn breeze.

I went back to that stool several times during my stay. But more importantly, I have gone back there in my mind thousands of times. When I am dealing with stress, the remembrance of that place is a calming influence. It is just a stool in the middle of the desert scrub, but for me, it was a holy place that brings me peace.

So I want to invite you this week. Take a moment to go for a walk, a hike, a Sunday stroll, a saunter. Take a companion or walk alone, either way is fine. Go slowly. Be patient. Be observant. Look around. Be open to surprises. Whether your journey takes you far into the wilderness or just into a peaceful part of your backyard or into the remembrances of places you have visited in the past, may you find that quiet stillness that allows you to recognize the holiness of that place and the love of the Creator that meets you there.