

Art scholars say that before Michelangelo came along, the standard paintings of creation showed God standing on the ground, sort of helping Adam to his feet. Not here. In the Sistine Chapel fresco God is rushing toward Adam on a cloud, one of the “chariots of heaven” perhaps, propelled by angels. It’s as if in the midst of the splendor of all creation, God’s entire being is wrapped up in his deep desire to close the gap between himself and this human man. God can hardly wait. His hand comes within a hair’s breadth of the man’s hand.

The painting is traditionally called *The Creation of Adam*, but some scholars say it should be called *The Endowment of Adam*. Adam has already been given physical life—his eyes are open, and he is conscious. What is happening in this scene is that he is being offered life with God. “All of man’s potential, physical and spiritual, is contained in this one timeless moment,” writes one art critic.

Apparently one of the messages that Michelangelo wanted to convey is God’s implacable determination to reach out to and be with the person he has created. God is as close as he can be. But having come that close, he allows just a little space, so that Adam can choose. He waits for Adam to make his move. Adam is more difficult to interpret. His arm is partially extended toward God, but his body reclines in a lazy pose, leaning backward as if he has no interest at all in making a connection. Maybe he assumes that God, having come this far, will close the gap. Maybe he is indifferent to the possibility of touching his Creator. Maybe he lacks the strength. All he would have to do is lift a finger.

This portrait can remind us that God is closer than we think. He is never farther than a prayer away. All it takes is the slightest effort, the lifting of our finger. Every moment—even this very moment, as you hear me say these words—is a “timeless moment” of divine endowment, of life with God. “This is my Father’s world...In the rustling grass I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere,” says the 19th century hymn.

The Scriptures are full of what might be called the everywhere-ness of God speaking to us, such as, in Psalm 19. “*The heavens are telling the glory of*

God...day to day pours forth speech” (Psalm 19:1-2). He talks through burning bushes and braying donkeys; he sends messages through storms and rainbows and earthquakes and dreams; he whispers in a still small voice. The story of the Bible isn’t primarily about the desire of people to be with God. Not really. It’s about the desire of God to be with us. (Ortberg, John. *God Is Closer Than You Think* (p. 12). Zondervan. Kindle Edition)

One night Jacob was running away from Esau, who was trying to kill him because Jacob had cheated him and deceived their father. Jacob stopped for the night at “a certain place.” That’s a Hebrew way of saying no place in particular. Cleveland, maybe. It could have been anywhere. Some spot by the side of the road with nothing special about it. Jacob had done nothing to merit what was about to happen to him. He had been a passive codependent of his mother’s schemes, a jealous rival to his brother, and a brazen liar to his father. But that night Jacob had a dream. He saw a stairway “*resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.*” God said to him: “*I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac...I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...*” When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “*Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it...This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven*” (Genesis 28:13, 15-17). (Ortberg, John. *God Is Closer Than You Think* (p. 18). Zondervan. Kindle Edition)

Aren’t you surprised that God chose Jacob to be the one through whom the world should be blessed? Jacob, the schemer, had coerced his brother to hand over his birthright, and tricked his father into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to his brother. Then, when Esau discovered Jacob’s treachery, Jacob fled for his life to the old family homeland. Abraham had left Harran many years before. Now Jacob headed back that way. When Jacob lay down to sleep he put his head on a stone. After he had gone to sleep, he dreamed of a great stairway. The bottom sat on the ground, but the top reached to the heavens; angels were ascending and descending. God sometimes uses angels to deliver messages to people, but he didn’t do that here. He came in

person to address Jacob. Given Jacob's scheming ways, I'm shocked at what God tells Jacob—all that he plans to do for him. Did you hear what the Lord tells Jacob? He says, *“I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...”* (28:13b-15).

To think that God would make these promises to such a trickster. I understood it when God made a covenant with Noah. Noah was a righteous man. I understood it when God made a covenant with Abraham. Abraham was a man of great faith. But I'm surprised that God makes a covenant with Jacob, because Jacob is pretty much of a scoundrel. Until this conversation, God was known as the God of Abraham and Isaac. Now and forevermore, God would be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This story in Genesis tells us some very important things about God. First, it tells us that God can come to us in the most ordinary places and in the most terrible circumstances of our lives. The place in which Jacob had camped that night was not a beautiful campground or a pleasant meadow. Walter Russell Bowie says, “It was a hilltop of barren rock; and its barrenness seemed to represent at that moment Jacob's claim on life. He was a fugitive, and he was afraid.”

But Jacob's guilt was even more terrible than his surroundings. He had cheated his brother and had deceived his father. He was running for his life. He was not a man who often let his conscience trouble him, but his conscience troubled him now. He knew he did not deserve God's blessing, so he did the same thing he had done when Esau offered to sell his birthright cheaply. He tried to “seal the deal” and “lock it in.” He prayed, *“If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear...of all that you give me I will give you a tenth”* (vss. 20, 22). What a great deal he was giving to God! He was saying, “God, if you make me rich, I will give you ten percent.” How extremely generous of this schemer!

E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India, told of seeing women from that country who had shaved their heads and explains what that meant. These women had offered their hair to one of their gods in return for a blessing. They had made a strict bargain: “If you do this for me, I will give you my hair.” That’s a pretty serious bargain. Are there women here who would be willing to shave your head in return for a blessing from God? My guess is that you would, but the stakes would have to be very high. You wouldn’t shave your head for money, but you would shave your head to save the life of someone you love.

Jones goes on to remind us that Christians don’t need to bargain with God. God offers us his blessings and his love. Like Jacob, we find it difficult to believe the promise. We know that we are undeserving and feel compelled to become deserving before reaching out to receive God’s blessings—to cut a deal. The key, however, is not becoming good enough to deserve God’s blessings. It is maintaining a relationship with God in which he can bless us. For example, we all need to be people of prayer. I like the way Mother Teresa put it: “Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of himself.”

I change the screensaver on my laptop from time to time. If you have ever come into my office and looked over my shoulder while I’m working at my laptop you would probably see a picture of three blonde-headed preschoolers who are my children’s children. Then it hit me. You and I are the children on God’s screen saver. The tiniest details of our lives will never grow old to God, because he views all his children through the eyes of a loving Father.

For centuries people have stood in line to view the picture of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But what if the miracle that is hinted at on that fresco became a reality in our lives? What if an artist greater than Michelangelo is at work on the canvas of our ordinary days? Brother Lawrence said, “God paints Himself in the depths of our souls.” It could happen anywhere and at any time, for any one of us. There’s no better time than right now to begin living with an awareness of God’s presence in each of our lives.

Recognize and experience God’s presence today. Amen.