

“We are Standing on Holy Ground,” sermon for July 19, 2026, FPC Marshfield.
Rev. Dr. Janet Wolfe

Texts: Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25.

Jacob is the second-born of twins born to Isaac and Rebekah. Therefore, his brother, Esau, is entitled to the birthright of the first-born. In our reading for today, he has set off on a journey to reconcile with his brother. When nightfall comes, he finds a stone to use for a pillow and falls asleep. He has a dream, in which God appears and promises him that he will have many offspring and that he will be the father of a great nation. When he awoke, he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.” He named the place Beth-el, the dwelling place of God.

We cannot say that God dwells in this place and not that, for God is everywhere. However, some places seem to bring us closer to God than others. In Celtic spirituality, developed in Ireland and Scotland, they talk about “thin places,” where God seems to be more present than in other places. As I said in “Discovery Time,” there are two places that for me are like that. One is at the Presbyterian Ghost Ranch conference center in northern New Mexico, a place that I have visited many times. The scenery is spectacular, as you can see from this photo. At night, the sky is dark, and you can see millions of stars. Their classes, usually a week or two in length, offer many opportunities for spiritual growth, including study of Celtic spirituality.

The other “thin place” for me is on the Island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, the home of a retreat center. The Abby dates back to the earliest Christianity in Scotland. The Abby was restored in 1938 by George MacLeod (1895-1991). He was a Celtic prophet of the 20th century who lived the way of compassion. Spirituality for him was found deep in the physical. Heaven is to be served in the material needs of humanity and the earth. Spirituality for him took the form of caring for the planet and for the lives of families struggling with homelessness, illness, and hunger in the slums of Scottish cities and communities throughout the world. For MacLeod, spirituality also took the form of nonviolence of action and of heart.

John Phillip Newell, former Warden of the Abby of Iona, has written several books about Celtic spirituality. His latest, “Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul: Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening what our Souls Know and Healing the World,” 2021. I am planning to review it with the Open Book Group during the next season. Celtic spirituality emphasizes the wonder and goodness of creation. It does not place a lot of emphasis on human sin, although it recognizes that we, as humans, often do wrong. I visited Iona when our Winnebago Presbytery took a tour of Scotland, led by Rev. Anne Caughran, a native of Scotland and former pastor at Weyauwega, in 2003.

I like the emphasis on the care of creation that is found in this spirituality. It does not emphasize the afterlife, but our relationship with God and creation right now in this life. It calls us to care for creation, to recognize that humans have caused much of the destruction of our environment by the burning of fossil fuels that cause the planet to warm. We have certainly experienced that warming in recent days, with temperatures in the 90s and smoke in the air from wildfires in Minnesota and Canada.

The passage from Romans 8 emphasizes the groaning of creation in labor pains as it seeks to fulfill God's promise that all creation is made good. We are adopted as children of God, filled with the Spirit and promised that we are joint heirs with Christ in God's creation. I find this much more hopeful than some spiritualities who look for the end of the world, thinking that God's kingdom cannot come until this world is no more. This way of thinking is perhaps best illustrated by the "Left Behind" series of novels that were popular a few years ago. They suggest that "the Rapture" has already taken place, and the story unfolds with those who are still left on earth. Will they be saved or will they spend eternity in hell, fire, and brimstone? This imagery is taken from a misrepresentation of the Book of Revelation first developed by John Nelson Darby in the 19th century. When we say that the Kingdom of God is here now and is ongoing, that seems to me to better fit the reality of the situation. For me, the Kingdom of God began when Jesus came into the world, showing us how to live in compassion and grace and seeking justice and peace.

John Phillip Newell tells of how he came to appreciate Celtic spirituality as he and his wife were called to serve as co-leaders of the Iona community. He had completed a doctorate in theology at the University of Edinburgh and been ordained to the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Iona was the sixth century birthplace of Scottish Christianity and a place of international pilgrimage. In 563, St. Columba had led a Celtic mission from Ireland to this little island that sits out on the Atlantic edge of Great Britain. Newell was responsible for shaping morning and evening prayer, among other duties. These prayers had been passed down through the centuries, first through oral tradition and then in the 19th century had been transcribed into written form. They were prayers about the ordinary circumstances of life, from the rising of the sun to its setting each day, to the birth of a child or the death of a loved one, to the recurring events in the endless cycle of seasons.

Newell realized that these prayers were a particular way of seeing that could be traced from the earliest centuries to today. His first book was *Celtic Prayers from Iona*. After his time on Iona he worked at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh in the mid-1990s. (This place was for me like the Vatican of Presbyterianism; John Knox first established it when he returned to Scotland after a time with Calvin in Geneva.) Newell's second book was *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, 1997. It makes use of an important image in Celtic spirituality, where John the Beloved was leaning toward Jesus at the Last

Supper, and was said to have heard the heartbeat of God. For Newell it was like a key for opening our consciousness to what the soul already knows, the sacredness of the earth and one another. There are many other important themes of Celtic spirituality, for example the sacredness of the feminine, which were lost when the Roman church came to dominate European Christianity. I hope that if this interests you that you might come to the book group or read some of Newell's books. I certainly found them enlightening and I think you might too.

I hope that you will listen for the heartbeat of God in all people and in all creation, for God is present everywhere. God may be easier to discern in some places, like the "thin places" we have mentioned, but we all stand in the presence of God for our whole lives.

Let us pray: God, be with us in all things and in all places, that we may feel your presence at any time, whether that be a difficult time or a joyous time. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.