

with assistance, has a nice voice, and seems to provide good answers. And I'm actually happy that people are getting the info they need in an accessible way. What bugs me is the implication that these voices in our phones, or words on our screen, are somehow becoming our actual friends. It's the advertisers' nudge to interact as if the voice is a person, a buddy, a counselor we can turn to. The data is powerful and it has many good uses. But the voice is not a real, true friend. Behind it, there is not someone who truly gets us. It is certainly not a God who accompanies us, or protects us, or calls us home. And when we mistake it for that, we are missing out on a life-giving relationship.

When the voice of God stopped talking and the stairway in the dream melted away, Jacob declared "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." The real, living God had connected with Jacob. Jacob had an encounter with the divine who had reached out to him and interacted with him, gifting him with assurance of God's holy presence. Surely the Lord was in that place. Surely the Lord is in this place, and whatever place you find yourself. Because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ, accompanies us everywhere. By the Spirit, God interacts with us as intimately as our own breath. There is no where we can go to flee God's presence, and no occasion on which we would need to. God is at work protecting us, not from hard things or bad days, but from loneliness and from our own worst selves. God is calling us back into relationship from the sin we fall into and drawing us closer to all that is holy and whole.

It's ok to use a bot or ChatGPT to find information we are curious about. You don't need my permission or blessing to do that. There's plenty of important uses of that technology and even plenty of spiritual guidance out there that can help us. But if we are looking to actually connect with God's holy presence, then we might do better to open ourselves to the God who is already reaching out to us. The answers we find will be a lot less concrete than anything a bot might say. The ways we encounter God will urge us to do a lot more wondering, listening, pondering, even wrestling with ideas. God's presence is real and good and relational; but it is not always clear and simple. After all, there is another story of God reaching out to Jacob, and in that one, God and Jacob literally wrestle each other. So being in relationship with our God does not always mean perfect clarity on our biggest questions. But it does mean confident assurance of God's accompaniment and protection, and God's constant reach that seeks to draw us close.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.

1 Qtd. in Lauren Jackson, "Finding God in the App Store," Sept 14, 2025, New York Times, [https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/us/chatbot-god.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.108.Gdq8.Dtyv6dXrMBf&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/us/chatbot-god.html?unlocked_article_code=1.108.Gdq8.Dtyv6dXrMBf&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare)

2 Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 244.

3 Bruggemann, 246.

September 21, 2025  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
"A Chatbot God?"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

"Who changed the sabbath to Sunday?"  
"I just want to hug you."

"Why am I poor yet others are rich?"<sup>1</sup>

Those are submissions that users typed into the app ChatwithGod.ai. It's an artificial intelligence web application, which is part of a whole array of new religious chatbots. Basically, you can type or speak your thoughts and questions into the app and get back answers from the bot. Some bots speak as if they are God; others just offer religious counsel. The bots use technology similar to ChatGPT to provide responses. From my basic understanding, that means they use already existing data and information on the internet to give a response back to you. The information is often on target, but sometimes not, and occasionally it's inaccurate with regard to facts. Many of the spiritual queries, though, are not fact-based at all, so we'd have to evaluate those responses differently. The bot responded to the person who wanted a hug: "My child, even though I cannot physically embrace you, know that God's love surrounds you always. His arms are a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." And then referenced Psalm 46, where that last sentence comes from. Many people are finding comfort and help from these technologies.

The *New York Times* has been doing a lot of reporting on religion lately. Their latest dive into religious chatbots shows the wonders of these tools, as well as some of their shortcomings. For many people, the bots are a new path into faith. They can be a starting point for people who are beginning to explore religion, while offering them a space to ask questions. They also increase access to religious and spiritual counsel for people who might not have a faith leader or peer to turn to. At the same time, some are concerned about what it means that folks are confessing their most personal and private information, and who knows what will happen to the data. Others are concerned that the bots' quick responses to life's deepest questions cuts off the process of people wondering, wrestling, and connecting with others to think through their answers. And this AI, like all others, does use a large amount of energy for

each query, which has environmental impacts, whatever the spiritual ones might be.

I can think of some questions Jacob might have asked a chatbot, had such a thing existed. How can I make my father believe I am my brother? How can I escape my brother who's really mad and threatening my life? Am I all alone out here in the desert? What will become of me? We see many sides of Jacob in the story today: the trickster Jacob, the fugitive on the run, and eventually, the worshipper. If there was ever any doubt that God can and does use unexpected people, even and especially sinners, Jacob put those questions to rest. Despite tricking his brother out of the elder son's blessing, despite going on the run to escape Esau's wrath, despite having to leave his family as he went off in search of a wife and a new life, God continued to work through Jacob. After all the family drama, Jacob was by himself off in the desert. When the sun set, true darkness must have fallen. So Jacob halted his getaway, found a stone of all things to use for a pillow, and laid down hoping for safety and rest.

We have to infer what Jacob might have been feeling that night. But fear, loneliness, and worry, could not have been far from his mind. His family was a mess. His future was uncertain. Even when we have not treated our siblings or family so poorly, we can relate to some of those feelings. Is there a God who cares about any of this? Are we left to our own devices? Does the presence of God change anything for us? Though these are big, spiritual questions, quick and clear answers do appeal to us.

We rarely get them. But Jacob, on that one night, got something even better than a bot's quick reply. God came to answer his questions directly. An amazing image came to Jacob in his dream that night: a stairway to heaven, a ladder, or maybe the kind of steps that were built into the sides of ancient pyramids. Whatever it looked like, the symbol was clear: this stairway connected God to earth. The heavenly realm and the earthly realm were joined; it was possible to traverse between them just as the angels were doing. Even though he was a fugitive, God was coming close to Jacob; he was not alone. As commentator Terrence Fretheim writes, "God comes where God is not anticipated."<sup>2</sup> The symbol spoke wonders; but God was just getting started.

After the image in the dream, God spoke directly to Jacob. God continued the promises that had been given to Jacob's father and grandfather, Isaac and Abraham: a place to live, a family, and blessings for all the world through his offspring. But even that was not all. God promised words I think we all yearn to hear. God said, "I am with you, I will keep you, and I will not leave you until I have done what I promised." I sense that those are things most people long to hear when praying in their beds at night, journaling as the sun comes up, or typing into their chatbots in the dark. We are looking for confirmation and assurance that this is not all there is. That earth is indeed connected to

heaven. That God is somehow at work in our messed up world. That God is going with us in our little lives despite our big mistakes or our family drama or the uncertain times we dwell in.

Jacob heard God's words. He heard God's promises of accompaniment, protection, and homecoming.<sup>3</sup> These promises were, in some ways, particular to Jacob. He was an ancestor of the faith, a progenitor of God's people. So to carry out his calling, he needed God's direct assurance. Yet Jacob's need to hear these things was also just a human one. Which means we share those desires with him. We yearn to hear that God accompanies us through our hard times. That God will go even further to protect us from all that seeks to harm us. And that, at the last, we will be drawn back to God in homecoming and hospitality.

It makes sense that some people are going to technology to get that kind of assurance. That's where we go to get confirmation on anything we aren't sure of. What's the name of that actor? How much Tylenol do I give my kid? What's the best route from here to there? The internet, apps, data, and technology seem to have every answer we need. And the religious bots do have answers. At least ones that can be found somewhat plainly in a scripture or in sermons or blog posts or articles someone has already written. But what those words on a screen miss is the relationship.

If we access a chatbot who is trying to embody the voice of God, then it might feel like the divine is with us wherever we go because our phones are always with us. But to experience the true presence of God, we must be in some kind of relationship with the holy one. We have to interact. There must be interpersonal involvement and connection between us. God promised to show up and stay with Jacob. But God also promised to keep him; to offer protection and care for him. God would send him out and also bring him home, perhaps to the same place on the map, but certainly back into God's own presence. These are the same promises we hear in the stories of Jesus and from the early church. Because of the grace of Christ, God is always right here with us, holding us and sheltering us. And at our end, God draws us back into God's safe, loving care. Even if we've made some mistakes like Jacob. Even if we find ourselves alone. We don't receive that relationship with God because we try hard or pray in the right way. We receive it just because God chooses to connect with us out of love. Because heaven and earth are connected and God wants to descend that ladder and be right here with us.

I've found myself yelling at the TV when ads for one of the regular, non-religious AI chatbots comes on the screen. The bot encourages people to ask questions, to talk to it normally. With a guy who's cooking a new recipe, the bot tells him to smell the spice to make sure it's the right one. A woman receives a new, more challenging workout when the bot acts as her fitness coach. It helps a man fix his car, even though he's no auto mechanic. The bot is snappy