

## “Surprised by God”

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 and Genesis 28:10-19

*He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’*

*Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!’*

*Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

*Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. 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, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 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!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'*

*So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.*

*Genesis 28:10-19*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you set before us the word. It is the Living Word. And so we listen, we reflect, we allow your Spirit to be present. So be with us now as together we wrestle with your Word for this day. Amen.

Not long ago I was talking with a woman about the security work she and her husband do for two different companies. They gather information on the internet and, in different ways, ferret out information, trying to connect the dots of a narrative or a larger picture of what's going on--very often they are trying to find out about things that are usually not legal. Except for the illegal part, I thought, you know, preparing a sermon is kind of like that. You gather information, you do word analysis, you read insights of others, you listen for what comes to the surface and try to connect the dots, and at some point along the way, at least most of the time, I hope, I will find myself thinking, *Ab, that's the point. That's the insight.* This morning, it wasn't so easy. But we are going to witness Jacob's story. What struck me is how his story is woven into the story of the generations before him and after him, that the partings and the parallels that go on in these stories are just amazing.

Genesis, then, is a book essentially of genealogy of the earliest people of faith. I found myself thinking about the tradition that some families have about writing names in the Bible—the front of the family Bible—and listing the dates of marriages and deaths. I think, in some ways, Genesis is like an expanded version of those front pages of a family Bible. It's a family genealogy that includes many layers of generations and tells us the stories behind the names.

Recently the lectionary readings have been about Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ismael, and Isaac and Jacob and Esau. They are not always easy stories about perfect people--and maybe that's the point. They are about rivalries and separations and deceptions and betrayals and sending forth and sending away. They are stories about life and its challenges. They are stories about faithfulness and faithlessness. And no story makes that more clear than the story of Jacob and Esau. Their rivalry as twins, we are told, began in their mother's womb with Jacob wanting to come out first and trying to hold onto Esau's heel. Jacob was a scoundrel. He was a con artist. If you remember, he stole Esau's birthright as the eldest. Then in the chapter prior to this morning's reading with the help of his mother, Jacob deceives his father for Esau's blessing of wealth.

We enter into the story today at the point just after the truth has come out. Isaac and Esau are both angry at being deceived and Esau is so angry, that Rebekah fears for her son's life and tells Jacob he has got to leave. But before he goes, surprisingly, Isaac gives him a blessing and sends him forth to another land with a vision of hope. During this time, too, Jacob's twin, Esau, learns that his parents don't like his present wives so we find out he seeks another wife and we see that the weaving of the generations comes together. For who is it that Esau marries this time, but the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, long banished from the land.

The writers of Genesis weave together a lot of parallels. Just as Ishmael was forced to leave his home due to family conflict (although I am beginning to wonder if it was more about making sure everybody had enough land for their herds), Jacob leaves home due to a family conflict. He leaves and he heads out into the wilderness. Though he knows where he is supposed to end up, he is going through a place unknown to him. His father has told him that he is to go and find his mother's people and find a wife and a new life. So he journeys forth, night comes, darkness falls and so he makes a pillow with a rock and goes to sleep.

And this is where things shift. Jacob has a dream, a dream of a ladder that goes from earth to heaven—or is it from heaven to earth? We don't really know. But perhaps the point of this structure is that we are to be reminded that heaven and earth are not totally separate. They are connected through the presence of God. So it was in the midst of that night that God comes to him in a dream and God shares the words of promise that echo from the past with Abraham, promises for the future saying, “I am the Lord, God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring and you shall spread abroad all the families of the earth and they shall be blessed in you and your offspring. 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.”

We sense that those words seep into Jacob's being, for when he awakes, things are different. Surprised by God, he knows that he is no longer in the middle of nowhere. He is in a holy place and he names it Bethel, which means “House of God”.

So what is the significance of this dream? For one thing, we see that Jacob begins a relationship with God. He now claims God, though as only Jacob can do it. The verses that follow tell us that IF God did this, and IF God does that, and IF—then I will claim this God as my God. He is always a scoundrel. But this is the first time that Jacob claims God as his God. And just as God once spoke to Abraham about a legacy and to Hagar about what would be Ishmael's legacy, Jacob learns that he will have a family of faith that will unfold in the world. This legacy is not just the legacy of his father and grandfather, but it's a strand that begins with him.

So what I was reminded of in the parallels is that in the midst of the wilderness, God speaks to Abraham and to Hagar about the promise of the future. God surprises them, not in the lush gardens but in the desolation of the wilderness. While Jacob has been sent forth to leave his homeland, he is told that he will return. While we don't know it yet, he and Esau will be reconciled. And so it is with Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was sent off early, but the two of them come together and they stand at Abraham's grave. Separation does end. Reconciliation does come.

I think the other thing that God promises Jacob is that God will be with him wherever he goes. People in those days thought that the gods were only gods of a particular locale, and only had powers in certain places. But God has met up with Jacob in the wilderness, a place far from home and God tells him that he will be with him in all times and in all places. This God is like no other god. And, we are reminded once again, God doesn't only work with the perfect and the pious. Jacob is not the most trustworthy of people. He is manipulative. He is always trying to climb some kind of ladder of status and power, and yet, God called him to be the father of a people. I think that kind of revelation is both startling and unsettling. Startling because we know he has proved himself

not to be the most trustworthy person but unsettling because it means God can call others—even us—to do things and even if we think we are not the best behaved of all people, or the most perfect of all people, God calls us.

So there in the wilderness, God commits to three things: the promise of presence—God will be with him wherever he goes; the gift of protection—*I will keep you always*; and blessing—the promise of a legacy. Three gifts of hope. There in that dream, a conversation from beyond this world, he experiences something as real as the day is dawning. For Jacob, who thinks he is nowhere, realizes that he is somewhere. He is in a holy place. While Jacob heads to a new and unfamiliar time in his life where no one knows him, he realizes that he is someone—a child of God. In the midst of all this, he must wonder will this next step amount to nothing? But he finds out that he is something. He will be the parent of a people. So Jacob, trickster and foiler of his brother and father, moves in a whole new direction, and this night apart shapes the rest of his life.

So with that in mind, perhaps there is another point for us to consider: that in the busyness and chaos of life, we might easily forget about the promises of God. But in the times when we step away from the familiar and daily routines of life, we may be surprised by God. Taking time apart may provide the invitation to remind us of the very things that Jacob was reminded of—that God is present with us wherever we go. Reminded that God loves us and protects us, not from the sufferings that come from life or in life, but from thinking that we are unworthy or unknown. That God offers us the legacy of being part of the people, part of the body of Christ where we are known, where we are called to serve and to love in his name. Like Jacob, we are part of a family, the family of faith, generations of people who have been claimed and challenged by the love of God. We have been named and claimed through baptism and cherished by the One who loves us and we inherit a legacy—the legacy of faith and the stories of faith. We are called to share our faith in words and deeds with the world. Indeed God loved us enough to send his Son that we might know about life and love in a new way, that we might continue the legacy of living out the promises of grace here in this life. So let us give thanks to God from whom all our blessings flow. Amen.