

Sermon for Sunday, July 23, 2023 Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Gen. 28:10-19a Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 Romans 8:12-25 Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43

Trusting God's Goodness

Before he has the dream, the man is called Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, son of Abraham and Sarah. His name, Jacob, means "the deceiver." And Jacob is on the run. His flight begins in Beersheba, down toward Egypt. He's heading for Haran, way up in modern-day Turkey, but he's tired, so tired of walking; so tired of looking back over his shoulder to see if he's being followed into that wilderness. It's a frightening place, the wilderness, full of bears and lions and serpents, with birds of prey circling overhead. Night is falling and Jacob is exhausted. He takes a stone for a pillow and tries to settle.

But he has trouble falling asleep. He keeps picturing his father, old, blind Isaac, on his death bed, waiting for his eldest son, Esau, to come to him for his blessing. And he remembers how, after the deception, Rebekah urged him to run far away, to his Uncle Laban, and to stay there until Esau's rage would cool down. With his memories, his exhaustion, and his fears swirling around in his head, Jacob finally falls asleep. That's when he has a vision, a dream so awesome in its words and pictures that he will never forget it.

Jacob dreams that there is a ladder set up on the earth, running all the way to heaven; and the angels of God are ascending and descending on it. And suddenly, God appears to stand right beside him and speaks to him directly. God communicates with this man who has shamed his family and can't imagine how he would ever restore their honour – or his own. And yet, in the dream, God tells

him that the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac are now his: land, innumerable offspring, blessing on all Jacob's children, through all the generations to come.

Like all the other characters we meet in Scripture, those who see God and hear the voice of God, Jacob is awe-struck. Generations of readers of this tale know Jacob's vision is true and trustworthy, first because of the awe that such an experience of God raises in the dreamer. There is fear mixed with that awe, the story tells us. Upon awakening, Jacob blurts out, "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" And then, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And so, that morning, Jacob sets up a pillar of stones, pours oil upon it and calls the place, "Bethel." "Beth" means "house" and "el" refers to God. "Bethel."

We couldn't say that Jacob, from that moment on, changes his habit of deceiving people to get what he wants. And he does get a taste of his own medicine when his uncle deceives him, promising his daughter, Rachael, in marriage, but giving away, instead, his heavily veiled eldest daughter, Leah. Imagine Jacob's discovery that he has married the wrong girl! The larger story is full of amusing deceptions on both sides. And yet, Jacob does come out of it all an honourable man. He begets twelve sons and some daughters by his two wives and by a couple of servant girls as well.

Years and years later, when Jacob decides to return home, he has a wealth of children and wives and livestock and treasure. You may want to go way back to the beginning of the Jacob story and read the whole thing. You might even Google "Jacob's ladder paintings."

The Jacob story is by no means the first one in Scriptures about sibling rivalry. There are so many dysfunctional, incestuous, and even murderous families in Genesis alone. And as the title indicates, these are stories about begetting, about generating life. In Genesis we meet Adam and Eve, with their fatal attraction. We meet Cain who kills his brother, Abel. And remember Noah? After God saved him and his family, Noah shamed his sons by drinking himself into a stupor and lying naked on his bed for all to see.

The women aren't above deception, either. They resort to all sorts of tricks to become pregnant, a necessity in their world. They actually sleep with their drunken father, as Lot's desperate daughters did. All these stories and all the begettings are used by the writers of Scriptures to show that the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac are now given to the bad boy, Jacob, that night in his dream in the wilderness.

As we read Genesis we might find ourselves wondering what sort of God we're dealing with. Is God that gullible? Even a bit of a chump? Or do the stories say more about human nature than the Divine nature. They reveal our vulnerability; our habits of thinking we can run away from this God; our surprise when God keeps bring us back, setting aside vengeance, being altogether trustworthy, altogether ready to see our dignity and worth when we choose, as Jacob does in the end, to come home and seek forgiveness. It would seem that goodness is not the default setting in humans. We've been messing up for a very long time, all the way back to the beginning. But the story hasn't come to its end yet. It's still being told, century after century, the story of coming home to God.

The writer of Matthew's gospel tells the story of learning to trust God in his day, around 70 C.E. He tells that parable of the wheat and the tares. It's not a lesson in farming practices. The writer of this gospel lives up in Antioch, in Turkey, among city folks with no interest in farming. But this parable is really about good and evil, about who's in and who's out of the Christian story. It's a story about ethics, how believers think and act. And how God acts.

And so, Jesus says, a householder scatters good seed – nothing wrong with the seed. But an enemy comes in and scatters weed seeds in the field. This subterfuge becomes apparent only after the growth is well along and everyone who passes by smirks, thinking of the shame the householder must feel. He brings yet more shame on himself by the leaving the weeds there instead of sending his workers into the wheat fields to rip out the weeds. Some remedies can do more harm than good, he tells his workers. You might uproot the wheat along with the tares. So, we must wait. The weeds can be gathered at harvest time and even used for fuel in the future. And the wheat can be harvested, gathered into the grain storehouses. And who'll be ashamed then? The enemy, that's who. The householder will regain his honour.

The story is offered partly as consolation to those suffering people of Matthew's day, torn from their roots in their own land, spread throughout the Roman Empire, rarely tasting justice. The parable seems to be saying to the followers of Jesus, several decades after his death: wait it out. A change is coming. It's called the reign of God. And it's already happening right under the nose of the Roman Emperor, right in the midst of a multicultural city, a city paying tribute to many gods and goddesses.

And yes, for the Jesus people in Egypt and Turkey and Persia, life was more vulnerable than ever. The early churches were tiny, surrounded by many faith traditions. And they struggled to decide who's in and who's out; to distinguish good from evil, honour from shame, friends from enemies. Is that not so in our times as well? It's often so hard to know who is the enemy. Consider our climate crisis. Or world hunger. Or wars. Who is to blame?

The answer from the parable may be that first, we wait. In the face of such complex evil, so much power over the world's most vulnerable, we are to wait. Jesus seems to teach that if we are criticized, we don't strike back right away. Wait. Forgo punishment. Show forbearance. Refuse to be shamed. The day is coming, Jesus says, when your patience and your trust in God's goodness will be vindicated.

Notice the story doesn't say wait and do nothing. The writer, Goethe, puts it this way: "Do not hurry; do not rest." There's work to be done as faithfully as we can do it while we wait.

While we endure today's times of trial, we will find our strength and dignity in the family Jesus is still creating. We are like angels in caring for one another. In this family, we have opportunity to teach one another to trust in life's essential goodness under God; to trust that it is God alone who deals with all the causes of sin and all evildoers in a great day of reckoning. The realm of heaven is already seeded and growing in our communities.

Here is what Paul writes to the church at Rome. He says creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay. Listen, he says. Even now the groaning can be heard, the labour pains heard. And so we cling to hope. This is what has

been sown in us by the goodness of God: hope. We hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. We work for justice and peace within our community and in the larger world. We remain faithful to the ethics of inclusion. And we celebrate our awesome encounters with the Divine in these hours of worship. We are those who say, with Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know." Amen.