

Sermon, August 23, 2017 Written and Delivered by Claire Brill

Genesis 28-19a; Romans 8-12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable unto to thee, O Lord my strength and redeemer.*

I do not know many travelers today that would find it restful to put a stone under their head for a pillow.

I do not know many farmers today that would purposely let weeds grow together with their crop until harvest time.

I do not know many preachers today that are as zealous as St. Paul, urging people to hope in things that they cannot see.

Back when I was taking classes in Old and New Testament at the Presbyterian School for Christian Education, I came across a button pin in a bookstore that read, "I didn't know that I didn't know." It spoke volumes to me then and it still rings true for me today.

Even though Bible stories have become more familiar to me through the years, I am always amazed how much more of God is revealed each time I reread a story as well as more details about people and places in the story. Holy Scripture is truly a marvel because of the way the stories shed light on our personal experiences. All three of our readings today seem to point to things that are not fully known.

Last week we learned of the birth of twins, Jacob and Esau born to Rebekah and Isaac. Forever at odds with each other, (scripture notes even before birth, they wrestled within Rebekah's womb), we find these brothers in today's reading well into their adult hood. Jacob is escaping to Haran to stay with his uncle Laban. He has tricked his aging, almost blind father into giving him his blessing on the birthright that Esau sold him some years ago. His father's blessing gives Jacob authority over all possessions, relatives and servants. Escaping Esau's wrath, he leaves his home country in Beersheba, which is south of Jerusalem, and goes north, between the Tigris and Euphrates, rivers to stay with Rebekah's brother, his uncle Laban in Haran. On his journey he stops to rest for the night.

Laying his head upon a stone, we are told he dreams... and in this dream he sees angels ascending and descending.... connecting heaven to earth .....escorting the Lord to stand beside him. And there the Lord reminds Jacob of his heritage.... "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." He is given the promise of offspring that shall spread abroad

to the west and to the east and to the north and south. And reminded, “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Here God asserts not only is he the God of his father and of his grandfather but that He is also the God of Jacob.

Jacob awakes, “surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it”. He knows now something he never knew or understood before. This was such an awakening in his personal knowledge. In his amazement he marked this place by pouring oil on the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar to mark the gate of heaven, a place called Bethel. In this moment he realizes that his life should not be governed by self-interest but by becoming a channel of God’s blessing to others..... At least for the moment anyway. We will hear more about his journey and encounters in the next few weeks.

We move to St. Paul presenting the Good News of salvation to the people in Rome. The Roman church was mostly Jewish but also contained a great number of Gentiles. His excitement of living in the Spirit is expressed beautifully by bearing witness to his realization that we are all children of God and if then children, we are heirs, joint heirs with Christ. Paul had grown up as a faithful Jew. So concerned with keeping the law, he was first and foremost in persecuting the early Christians. But he too has a revelation on that road to Damascus where his heart changed from the way of the flesh, and went beyond the Law, with Christ into the way of Love.

Paul’s exuberance however, (Romans 5:2-5) does not discount Christ’s suffering. It’s because of his suffering, nothing we encounter cannot be absolved or healed because Christ absorbs and transforms our suffering. “we have obtained access to this grace so that we can boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Matthew’s gospel furthers the theme of hope. It is full of Jesus’ parables about the kingdom of heaven using images and tangible things that people of the time could relate too. Believing that the kingdom of heaven was near, people were expecting a physical and temporal kingdom, one with physical rule. Jesus spoke to them in tangible terms trusting that their experience would lead them further into understanding the spiritual significance of the kingdom that Christ offers. In particular, this parable addresses evil head on. Evil in this case, was not just happenstance where good seed falls into infertile soil, but it was deliberately sown. The weed the people associated it with in this story was more than likely a weed called *bearded darnel* known in biblical terms as tares. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop.

Above ground, dandelion looks identical to wheat until it bears seed. Only when it bears fruit, can it be identified. This enemy can surround us or it can be within us.

We all have personal experiences of weeds. They can surround us or they can be within us. They can infect our souls, hearts and minds. They can be subtle distractions that derail us, or major disruptions that turn our lives upside down. But the good news is that God does the sorting - In a world where seeds of hatred and injustice are daily sown, the parable affirms unequivocally that God is the one in charge. He is the only one that can free us so we can get on with the business of loving ourselves and each other.

Matthew, to me, writes with more certainty of the meaning of these parables. But we have to remember, Matthew in his early years was a despised tax collector and then became a disciple of Jesus. His Gospel does much to testify to the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. But he often ends the retelling of the parables with the statement, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

For me that gives pause to insert our experiences into the parable and see where we too can sort out our own faith journey. What is it that we hear but cannot know for certain? Scriptures for the most part do not offer us rational certitude. To quote theologian, Richard Rohr, "Scripture offers us something much better and an entirely different way of knowing: an intimate relationship, a dark journey, a path where we must discover for ourselves that grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness are absolutely necessary for survival in an uncertain world.

You only need enough clarity and ground to know how to live in the uncertainty..." amid the wheat and amid the tares, taking the good with the bad.... " thus believing we really are saved by faith. People who live in this way never stop growing and are not easily defeated."

In all of these stories, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Paul and Matthew were not easily defeated. Their stories live because we recognize these stories within our own lives. Difficulties and sufferings do allow for God to enter in and reveal his love for us and to give us hope to go forth.

I encourage you to take some time to ponder the holy places in your own life, places where you too could leave a stone marker for holy ground. These are important places. It is there that you have encountered God and perhaps he has even done some sorting for you there. Don't be surprised for another encounter where more of God is revealed to remind you again and again that you too have become his channel to strengthen His love in our world.