

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Jessica Chambers

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I have a story for you, but first I have to warn you that this story is not actually necessary to make my point; mostly I just think it's funny. My 18-year-old brother recently moved to Arizona. Last week he decided to go on his first hike through the desert, so he found a map with hiking areas labeled "amateur," "intermediate," and "expert." He refused to pick an amateur hike, because (and I quote), "I'm no amateur; I'm a Boy Scout." Someone should have reminded him that it took him three attempts to get his navigating merit badge. Long story short, he ended up lost for seven hours with no water, and after an unfortunate incident with a cactus, only one shoe. So I told him about this sermon, and asked if he had any insights from the desert, because I don't really have anything to say about a guy who traveled through a desert and had a dream. He asked me if this guy was lost, and when I told him that he knew exactly where he was going, he said, "Well, I was lost for seven hours with one shoe and God didn't bother to appear to me, so you might want to rethink how important you find this story."

I actually do think this story is important. What Jacob's dream seems to be telling us is that the God whom we already knew to be transcendent, the Creator God who is the very ground of being is also a God who is willing to open the gates of heaven so that heaven and earth might collide for our benefit. We have a God who is willing to make and to keep promises and a God who reveals God's self to us for our own good. We have God Most High who is also God With Us. Our God is even God With Us when we are total jerks.

I say "total jerks" because I think that this patriarch of ours, Jacob, is a total jerk. He's selfish and he's a swindler. He tricks his brother into giving him his birthright, and then he tricks his dad, who is blind and possibly suffering from some other disability, into giving him his brother's blessing. Then, when his brother gets mad, he not only runs away, but has his mom help him get his dad's blessing over the journey. I would expect someone who has Abraham as a grandparent to turn out a little more pious than this, but we don't really have anything from the text to suggest that Jacob is especially concerned with God up to this point; his motives are questionable at best. So Jacob flees Beer Sheva and heads toward Haran, but has to stop to sleep at a yet unknown place; here God appears to him in a dream and confirms the blessing Isaac has given him, and even promises to be with him and to keep him wherever he goes.

Fast forward about 18 hundred years or so and we have, in this same land, God revealing God's self again, this time in the form of Jesus, the Galilean, who teaches mainly in parables. It is this Jesus who teaches us about the Kingdom of Heaven. We could argue all day about what he means when he talks about the fire into which the weeds are thrown. We're not going to do that, because the part that concerns us and how we ought to live comes before that. Jesus tells us that it is not our job to figure out who ought to be kept and who ought to be discarded. The boundaries that we would give the Kingdom are not the boundaries that God gives the Kingdom. God's Kingdom is not constrained by gender or culture or geography or status or anything else we might assume could constrain it.

In today's parable, Jesus says that we cannot discard the weeds because doing so will uproot the wheat as well. If it had been up to me, Jacob would not have received God's blessing. From what

I have seen of his story so far, I don't like Jacob – and I want the Kingdom to be a place for the people I like. But God *does* reveal God's self to Jacob and God *does* bless him, and that is good, because we get to see Jacob become someone who keeps promises and who loves the God who is not only the God of Abraham and Isaac, but also of himself. And God's promise is also kept; he gives Jacob many offspring and the world is blessed through them.

It seems that as God is revealed to Jacob, Jacob's desires fade and God is seen more clearly. If it had been up to me, Jacob never would have gotten to see God and receive blessing. If it had been up to me, the whole world would have missed out on the blessing it received through Jacob and his offspring. When we choose who deserves to be blessed, who deserves to be in the Kingdom of God, we uproot the wheat with the weeds. When we make these decisions, we are making our own desires and ideas about God out to be God, and our own desires and ideas about God are at their very best mere shadows of God. When we do this, we do more harm than good. This Kingdom does not belong to us; *we* are a part of *it*. This world does not even belong to us; we were told from the beginning that the earth and everything in it is God's. It is God's world and God's Kingdom and we are asked to keep and to care for them both.

This land where Jacob met God and where Jesus walked is God's Promised Land. It is not *Jacob's* promised land; it is not *our* promised land. This land where heaven and earth collide in dreams and visions and miracles belongs to no one but God alone. It is God's Promised Land, but we, or at least I, do not believe that God dwells in only one land or in one people. The God who breathed creation into being, and who is greater than all other gods, is the very same God who dwelt in the obedient Abraham, the passive Isaac, and the swindling Jacob. This God is the very God who dwells in each of you and in me. That place in Israel just north of the Negev where God was revealed to Jacob is not the only place where God dwells. This sanctuary is not the only place where God dwells. Each one of us is as much of a holy space as any geographical place that God has revealed God's self. God reveals God's self in and through us; your bodies are holy places; each and every body is a holy place.

In recent weeks, during Morning Prayer here, I've been praying for "my friends who live in Jerusalem and for all people in Israel and Gaza under danger of rocket fire." I thought I was doing well because I'm not interested in picking sides in the Israel-Gaza fight and I prayed for both sides. But last Sunday, Ruth prayed for both the people being killed and the people killing them. I forgot to pray for the people I don't want to pray for, the people I don't like, the people I want to weed out. But those people have had the breath of God breathed into them too, and I don't get to decide whether or not they receive blessings from God or whether or not they have a place in God's Kingdom.

When we claim the land and the bodies of us and of others as our own, we lay claim to something that does not belong to us. When we decide which of these things ought to be kept and which of these things ought to be discarded, we uproot the wheat with the weeds. In this world, mistaking our own desires and ideas about God for God can be deadly. Aside from the Israel-Gaza conflict, there has been a lot of killing this week. A passenger jet was shot down, there was a bombing in a street market in Kabul, and a small skirmish in Tunisia—and that's not even half of it. In this world there is constant violence and war, constant death and destruction,

constant pain and fear. This world does not need our projections of God. Rather, this world needs God.

When we have this God who is both Most High and With Us, who dwells in heaven, walks on earth, and lives within us, there is no need for us to try to be God. God asks a lot of us; we are asked to love and take care of creation and of one another. We are asked to love, to know, and to respond to God. We are even supposed to become more *like* God, but we are never asked to discard the weeds. It's good, too, because if we all got to set the boundaries for who is in and who is out, I am not convinced any of us could live up to our own standards. Thanks be to God that there are so many places where heaven and earth collide, because if God did not reveal God's self to us, we would have no chance of even knowing the God who is better than our own desires. And thanks be to God that we do not have to be God.