

GOD AMONG THE ROCKS

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Psalm 139

Romans 8:12 – 25 ~ Creation groans with labor pains

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 ~ The parable of the weeds scattered among the good seeds.

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely God is in this place - and I did not know it!"

Over the years I'm quite certain we have met and even become friends with people whom others would consider but little better than the devil – if one believes there is a devil.

I think though, there is one conclusion about all these people who have crossed our path, and that conclusion is that no matter what they've done we cannot know what is going to come next, nor can we pin down just where God is and what God is about.

I invite us to hold onto that thought today - hold onto it when we meet people that strike us as evil, and I want us to hold onto it when we feel that we ourselves are out of reach of God.

I want us to hold onto it when you watch the news at six or if we ever the occasion to walk into in a court room to face a judge. Hold onto it when we see the one in the neighborhood making their rounds, to tell the latest piece of gossip and I want us to hold onto when we encounter an unscrupulous salesperson doing their pitch.

We do not know what is going to come next, nor can we pin down just where God is and what God is about.

This is the message of Jacob's story -the Jacob who cheated his brother and stole his birthright -the Jacob who fled to do his father's bidding, fled not because he was particularly obedient -but because he feared that he would be killed if he stayed at home. And as he fled he came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, he took a stone of the place and put it under his head and lay down, and he slept - and he dreamed - and in

that dream God came to him -God came to him who was tired and fearful, to him who was alone and thought that he was loved by none except his mother - God came to him who was a cheat and a rascal and goodness knows what else, and God gave to him a vision of a staircase reaching into heaven, of a ladder upon which the angels ascended and descended to do God's bidding. As Jacob looked upon this scene, God gave him a promise, the promise made to his grandfather Abraham and to his father Isaac, saying "know that I am with you - and will keep you wherever you go, that I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

And Jacob awoke - and he said - and catch this line - he said, "Surely God is in this place - and I did not know it!" Does that fit our experience? Have we ever been in God's presence and hardly noticed it? Have we ever suddenly realized that God had been with us long before we knew God was there? Have we ever been in exile or in fear only to discover God coming to our aid?

Have we ever had our picture of someone completely painted only to discover that the light has shifted - that the person we thought we saw - has completely changed? Changed for the better?

Have we ever painted a picture of our self - a picture in which the colors are all blue - all depressed - all unlovable - only to discover that someone loves us? That someone believes in us? That we are more than welcome in God's presence?

The good news of Jacob's story is not simply that there are links to the place we name heaven. The good news is not that God sometimes comes to us. The good news is not that heaven and earth are somehow connected. The good news is not that Jacob was a special kind of guy despite his tricky ways. Nor is the good news simply that we see God keeping and renewing God's promise to Abraham and to Isaac to raise up a people and to bless them to be blessing.

No - the good news is all but hidden in that single sentence: "Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!" Do we understand? Do we get it? Do we have ears to hear?

The gospel reading today, the reading about the parable of the wheat and the weeds is instructive for us. It is instructive not because it prophesies the ultimate destruction of those involved in evil, - nor because it teaches us that the blights on our lives and the weeds that suck up the nutrition of better plants are afflictions that cause broken relationships with God and others.

No, it is instructive for us because it teaches us patience - patience in the face of situations that seem bad to us, - patience in the face of evil, - patience in the midst of our urge to go out and fix things and make them right - patience in the face of our desire to make judgments about others and to act on those judgments.

We do not know what is going to come next, nor can we pin down just where God is and what God is about. In fact we can't even be sure that the weeds about us will remain weeds and that the wheat will remain wheat.

Consider Moses – a young offender who committed murder, consider David - an adulterer, consider the Apostle Paul - a religious vigilante, one of those involved in the stoning of Stephen, consider the disciple Peter - a hypocrite and a coward. Who would think that God would work with them? That God would be present with them? That God would love them? That God would make them great? That God would grant to them the blessings of God's realm?

Consider ourselves....What judgments do we make upon ourselves?

Master - say the servants in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, Master, do you want us to go out and gather the weeds for burning? Do you want us to pluck out the evil sown by your enemy, to try to separate out the roots - to destroy that which is doing harm?

No - says the master - for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Wait till harvest time - wait till the reapers go forth. Wait. Where is God? What is God doing? We do not know what is going to come next, nor can we pin down just where God is and what God is about.

But we can be sure of one thing - we can know one truth. We can rely on a truth - and that is - God will surprise us. God will surprise us by embracing us when we feel most unlovable. God will surprise us by turning our greatest sorrows into sources of strength and healing. God will surprise us by taking the lost and alone and making them great lights. God will surprise us by making sour lemons into thirst quenching drinks. God will surprise us by converting moments of pain into stripes that heal. God will surprise us by changing a time of death into eternal life.

Surely God is in this place - and I did not know it. This could be a cry of despair -coming as it does from Jacob. It could be the kind of cry we have all uttered when we have done one thing when we ought to have done another. It could be a cry of despair and a moment of longing for that which is past. But it is not!

For Jacob that cry signals a moment of awakening, a time of opening his eyes and truly seeing, a time of opening his ears and truly listening, a time of coming from the night of uncertainty into the daylight of a holy hope.

For Jacob that cry signals a moment of discovering that, yes, God is here: here even when we do not know it, here even when we think that God can not, should not, will not be here, here even when we are not looking for God to be here.

And in discovering that God is here, it is for Jacob a moment in which he understands that God is here to bless and to heal; that God is here to comfort and to guide; that God is here to change to transform; that God is here to help and to reassure.

And Jacob woke from his sleep, and he said "Surely God is in this place - and I did not know it" and yes - Jacob was afraid - afraid not because he had made some mistake, but afraid because he realized just how holy was the place he was in - and as he looked in that fear upon the sand and rock and the dry plants and soil of that place, he said , "How awesome is this place - this is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven". And Jacob took the stone upon which he had laid his head while he slept and he made of it a kind of memorial - a kind of altar, and he poured oil upon that stone upon which he had his vision and he named the place in which he had slept Bethel - "The House of God"

How awesome indeed is the place of God, the place in which the weeds are allowed to grow up with the wheat, the place in which all we have for pillows are stones, the place in which we fear and long for comfort and think we have none, the place in which the lost are found and the blind given sight.

We do not know what is going to come next, nor can we pin down just where God is and what God is about. But if we wait - if we let God do whatever it is God does, if we let God move in mysterious ways – God’s wonders to perform, we will find ourselves surprised in the most wonderful of ways. We will discover that where we are - wherever we are - is the Household of God, even among the rocks.