

Sermon – Completely  
Scripture Readings – Genesis 28:10-19a, Matthew 13:24-30  
Sunday, July 20, 2014  
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Our first scripture reading is Genesis 28:10-19a. This narrative is Jacob's encounter with God in a dream at Bethel, running for his life and returning to his mother Rebecca's home following their deception of his twin brother Esau for their father Isaac's blessing. Jacob finds himself in an in-between place, lonely and frightened. In the solitude of the night he experiences an unexpected encounter with God. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 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. 12 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. 13 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; 14 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. 15 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." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17 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." 18 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. 19 He called that place Bethel.*

Our second scripture reading today is Matthew 13:24-30. This is the second parable about sowing seeds for an eventual harvest that Jesus has offered, a subject that would have been familiar to his agrarian listeners at the time. Despite that familiarity, this parable, like all of Jesus' parables, is richly complex, and so asks that we engage our minds as we engage with God's word. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 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?" 28 He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" 29 But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 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.' "*

The title of the sermon: *Completely*

The text: *"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." Genesis 28:15*

Let us pray: Holy God, you have searched us and known us. No matter how far we might go, no matter what weeds might arise within us, your hand shall hold us fast. Teach us your ways, and make us complete. May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A couple weeks back, when I looked at the texts for this week, I have to admit that I wasn't filled with overflowing joy. In fact—I may have groaned. Loudly. Twice.

Jacob's ladder is a lovely story, and I have fond memories of it from VBS, but it's never particularly touched me before. And today's parable is a bit tricky. It's lots of fun to grapple with, certainly, but when Jesus explains it—something we didn't read today—he uses the actual phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

That's not quite how I'd wanted to introduce myself.

But I like a challenge.

And as time went on—as I packed up my life in New Haven and said goodbye to friends and classmates—this story of Jacob began to offer more than I'd remembered.

Jacob is on a journey. More than that, he is a refugee. His brother Esau is furious, and threatened to kill him after Jacob tricked Esau out of their father's blessing.

So to save his own life, Jacob says goodbye to his parents, to his home, to the life he's always known—and sets off for a new place.

In today's reading, he is smack in the middle of in-between time. I can certainly relate, but so, I expect, can we all. We've all been in-between at some point—halfway between one thing and the next—homes, jobs, relationships, schools—in fact, this is summer, a cultural time of in-betweenness, particularly for young people, both those still in school and those who have recently graduated.

And here is Jacob, in this in-between place we all know, coming from the known and looking ahead to the unknown. And he sleeps. And he dreams.

And in this dream, a ladder, with angels descending and ascending, connects earth and heaven, stretching between the two.

Jacob is not only between known and unknown, between past and future, between journey's beginning and journey's end---in his dream he is shown the place between heaven and earth.

His dream reflects where he is in his life, this not-quite, this neither one nor the other. What certainty can be found here?

Like at Westminster, the church I grew up in sends its youth group on house-building mission trips each summer—that in-between time for students.

For that trip, each year we went down to northern Mexico, just across the border. And I remember each year we had that sense of uncertainty, that sense of in-between, of incompleteness. No matter how often any one individual had gone, each year began anew. We were not yet a cohesive team, not yet practiced construction workers, not yet acquainted with the family for whom we would be building.

And northern Mexico itself is an in-between sort of place—many of the families we built for had come north for the factory jobs, producing goods that are then sent over the border into the States.

So it wasn't just us who felt uncertain and between things—often the families of the homes we built did, too.

Without homes, they slept much as Jacob must have this night on his journey—much as we did while we were there to build—on the ground, in the dirt, intimately acquainted with the rocks and stones. But *this* is where God stands beside Jacob.

Here, out in the wilderness, in between what he knows and he has yet to know, uncertain, likely afraid, in between heaven and earth—God appears to Jacob, and God makes an extraordinary promise.

Now—Jacob is not a perfect person. In fact, Jacob is his fleeing for his life because he tricked his brother and deceived his father. Maybe it's too big a leap to call him a thief, but he certainly wasn't very kind.

More than that, he's not quite getting what's going on in this dream. In the verses immediately after what we've read today, in response to God's extraordinary promise, Jacob makes a vow to God—conditionally. He promises to return and worship God—as long as in the mean time God watches out for him and feeds him and clothes him and returns him home again safely.

But God doesn't laugh, or smite him (though perhaps there is at least a little celestial eye-rolling), nor does God revoke this promise and give it to someone more worthy.

No, God stays with Jacob, and keeps this promise that is the heart of God's covenant with us and with all people. For God knows that Jacob—like each of us—is not perfect,

is somehow incomplete; that in the in-between place that is Jacob's life there is work yet to be done.

There is work yet to be done in today's parable, also. Good seed has been sown in the field, yet weeds have grown up, too. Another step has been added to the work of harvesting that already is waiting to be done.

And in between the sowing and the harvest, the wheat must grow with the weeds. And this is where I have some questions for Jesus, because during all this time of growing, where is the farmer?

I don't know a whole lot about agriculture, but I remember my parents patiently explaining that, yes, we had to go out and weed the garden AGAIN because we had to keep weeds from growing and choking out what we'd planted.

Where is God in this field left to its own devices? What work is God doing, exactly? This farmer seems awfully content to sit back and let the wheat do its best work to grow despite the weeds. And that can't be right, because we're Presbyterian and we don't believe in works righteousness.

I also can't help but wonder---did Esau see Jacob as a weed, doing his best to choke out his older brother and keep him from growing, keep him from his inheritance and his expected completeness as the elder? Was Esau's threat to kill Jacob Esau figuring he'd do God a favor and throw this weed on the fire a little earlier than planned?

But despite Jacob's deceit, despite his tricks, despite his conditional promises, God chooses him.

God stands beside Jacob in between heaven and earth and all the parts of Jacob's life, in the uncertainty of this incomplete journey and God promises to be with Jacob always; promises to be with Jacob everywhere; promises to be the certainty in every in-between place until the day that God will bring Jacob home, and out of the in-between.

And God's promise of completeness, of doing that work that has yet to be done and of being with us through it, is not for Jacob alone. This promise is given to all Jacob's offspring, who will cover the earth. And yet this promise will be even more complete, for through Jacob's family this promise and this blessing shall extend to every family.

And Jacob awakes, and names this place---this completely in-between place---Bethel: the house of God.

On those mission trips in high school, we started with an empty piece of land---a field of sorts, in which we sowed the seeds of a home. We laid concrete foundations, built walls and covered them in stucco, raised roofs that would (hopefully) keep the rain out.

We always finished our work, but these houses were never complete. The interiors were unfinished, the stucco unpainted---and the house not yet a home. But in that time

between house and home, each year we handed over the keys to the families, offered blessings and were given blessings in return.

And looking back at those incomplete, in-between houses, I remember what Jacob learned—that Bethel, that *God's* house is in the completely in-between spaces. And what reassurance! For our work was done—everything that had seemed scary and new had become through our work and God's exciting and GOOD, but we were still not done. For each year we still had to journey home—we still had to return and struggle to explain what we had learned, the ways we had grown, what seeds had been planted in us.

And yet, like the field of the parable, we still had our own weeds—both the weeds of society—consumerism and prejudice and injustices of every kind—but also our own weeds, deep within ourselves, like Jacob's of deceit and unkindness.

And this happens not just on high school mission trips, but in every experience of our lives. In all the in-betweenness of the journey of human life, we grow, we learn, we plant seeds—and we find that weeds have been planted, too, no matter how good our intentions.

But God is with us.

God stood beside Jacob in that dream and made a promise that finds its completeness in us. God will be with us, working in and through us until that harvest time, when our weeds will be separated out and we will be able to be completely ourselves. God knows us—the psalmist writes that God has searched us and know us intimately and completely: God knows all our weeds and loves us fiercely regardless.

God is always with us and will keep us wherever we go. Even in that field, where it may seem we are left with our weeds growing unchecked—God is the life-giving soil, feeding us and giving us strength to live and grow anyway, despite the weeds that take root even in our own hearts and threaten to choke us.

On his journey Jacob slept, incomplete and in-between, tangled in his own weeds, and THERE God stood beside him at the gates of heaven, and made him an extraordinary promise: that through Jacob, this imperfect person, and his family, all families of the earth are blessed, for from this family will come Jesus who makes the covenant complete.

There is, of course, still work to be done—but God makes a promise that Jacob—that each of us—will be made complete, and that God will be with us, working through us, always and in everything. On the journeys of our lives, in all the uncertainty and in all the unknown, the promise of this covenant holds true, for God makes God's house in the in-between places.

God began a good work in our sowing. God continues a good work in our growing, and as long as there is work to do, until we are made complete, God will be with us, completely.

Thanks be to God.

