

PENTECOST 8

Proper 11 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Donna Stanford in 2017.

Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He 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. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And 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, ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And 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."

¹⁸So 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. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Commentary from Donna Stanford

Jacob is on the run. He and Rebekah, his mother, have connived to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob his older brother Esau's birthright. Jacob's deception, which led Isaac to grant him the blessing due the first-born son, fuels hatred in Esau. When Rebekah is told that Esau plans to kill Jacob, she sends Jacob away to her brother in Haran.

Our story begins when Jacob stops on his first night on the road. He lays down with a stone under his head for a pillow and falls asleep. Little does he know that he is on sacred ground. Jacob dreams of a ladder or ziggurat to heaven with angels climbing up and down. However,

it is not the angels who speak to Jacob, but God. God stands beside Jacob and introduces himself: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (verse 13).

God makes the same promises to Jacob that he made to Jacob's ancestors: land and offspring. In a sense, God includes a caveat with his blessings. In essence, God tells Jacob, "You will be blessed when I fulfill my promises to you. But these blessings are not for you to hoard. It is through you and your family that all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God then makes a personal promise to Jacob: "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" (verse 15). God's promises of presence and protection – of belonging to God – are central to the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people.

Jacob awakes a transformed man. He recognizes the awesomeness and sacredness of his encounter with God and commemorates it with a shrine made with the stone on which he slept, calling the place Beth-el, "House of God."

Discussion Questions

Are you hoarding the blessings God has given you? How can you channel your blessings so that you will become a blessing to others?

How has your experience of God's grace transformed you?

Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23

- ¹ Lord, you have searched me out and known me; *
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
- ² You trace my journeys and my resting-places *
and are acquainted with all my ways.
- ³ Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, *
but you, O Lord, know it altogether.
- ⁴ You press upon me behind and before *
and lay your hand upon me.
- ⁵ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; *
it is so high that I cannot attain to it.
- ⁶ Where can I go then from your Spirit? *
where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁷ If I climb up to heaven, you are there; *
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
- ⁸ If I take the wings of the morning *
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
- ⁹ Even there your hand will lead me *
and your right hand hold me fast.
- ¹⁰ If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, *
and the light around me turn to night,"
- ¹¹ Darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day; *
darkness and light to you are both alike.
- ²² Search me out, O God, and know my heart; *
try me and know my restless thoughts.
- ²³ Look well whether there be any wickedness in me *
and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

Discussion Questions

Does God knowing you fully make you uncomfortable? Are you able to say with the psalmist with no reservations: "LORD, you have searched me out and known me"?

Have you ever wanted to escape from the presence of God? When and why?

Commentary from Donna Stanford

The psalmist, resting assured in God's promised presence and protection, turns to God for deliverance from his enemies. His blessing is his relationship with God. The psalmist addresses God by his personal divine name, YHWH ("LORD") (verses 1, 3), and speaks to God directly: "you know" (verses 1, 3), "you discern" (verse 1), "you trace" (verse 2), "you press" (verse 4), "[you] lay your hand" (verse 4). The psalmist is awed by the completeness of God's all-encompassing knowledge of him; God knows his actions, thoughts, and words (verses 1-3).

The psalmist affirms that God is always present with him. No matter where the psalmist goes, whether to the extremes of heaven or the grave, "Even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast" (verse 9). The psalmist trusts his future to God, assured that he belongs to God. He welcomes God's testing, which will reveal the psalmist's righteousness and commitment to following the ways of God (verses 23-24).

Romans 8:12-25

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are obligated, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Commentary from Donna Stanford

To Paul, every human being is subject to some power, and lives either in the domain of the flesh, under the power of sin, death and law; or in the domain of the Spirit, under the power of grace. Paul has assured believers in an earlier verse that they no longer live in the domain of the flesh, but now live in the domain of the Spirit, because the Spirit of God dwells in them (Romans 8:9).

In today’s passage, Paul describes life in the Spirit in terms of relationships. “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (verse 14). The indwelling Spirit is God’s presence with believers. Believers are blessed; we belong to God’s family – children of God by adoption (verses 14-15). We are God’s heirs and, therefore, joint heirs with Christ, sharing in his suffering, death, resurrection and glory (verse 17). We are to live unafraid, knowing that we belong to God.

Just as God fulfilled his promises to Jacob, Paul admonishes believers to wait with patience because

God will fulfill his promise of future glory. God will free all of creation “from its bondage to decay” (verse 21). Believers and all creation must endure the birth pangs of the completion of salvation – of the promised restoration of creation to what God intended it to be, begun when God chose a people to be his instruments of blessing.

Discussion Questions

In what ways do you sense that you are living in the “in-between” time?

Discuss your experience of life in the Spirit.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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.’”

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Commentary from Donna Stanford

In the parable of the weeds among the wheat, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a field sowed by two sowers.

The master sows good wheat seeds in his field. At night, an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat seeds. When the wheat comes up and bears grain, the weeds come up as well. The master refuses to let his slaves gather the weeds. He tells them to let both of

them grow together until the harvest, when the reapers will collect the weeds to be burned and gather the wheat into the barn.

Jesus privately interprets the parable to his disciples as an allegory. He is the master, and the good seeds are the children of Kingdom of God. The enemy is the devil, and the weeds are the children of the evil one. At the final judgment, the Son of Man will send his angels to root out sin and evildoers, and the righteous will inherit the Kingdom. God’s promise in the parable is that evil will not overcome the good.

There is a more contemporary dimension to the parable. In a previous chapter from Matthew, Jesus called us to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” or “is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Could it be that the final judgment isn’t a distant event in linear time but is now? Could it be that the Kingdom isn’t someplace that will be established in the future but is here now? Were both inaugurated with the coming of God in Jesus?

Jesus issues a warning: Those who reject Jesus’ message are refusing to participate in the Kingdom. They are refusing to be the blessing to all the families of the earth that God calls believers to be. Those who accept Jesus’ message and follow the praxis of the Beatitudes belong to God, are his children and have inherited the promised Kingdom.

Discussion Questions

What is the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God?

How does your faith that God’s Kingdom will triumph over evil and death influence the way you live?