

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Genesis 28:10-10a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

A notice about the election of the first African-American chairman in the 103 year-old history of the Southern Baptist Convention prompted me to remember a conversation I had some time ago now with a member of this denomination. I found that her faith informed her life in a rather remarkable way; she had given up her work in Florida to care for her elderly great aunt, a member of the church I was serving as rector. I had interacted with Southern Baptists before including friends at seminary and at a bed and breakfast in Louisiana where the owners not only invited but also drove us to their church for a Sunday service. I had organized several interfaith luncheons, recruiting the Christian and Jewish speakers while our Turkish Muslim friends brought their own speaker, depending on our topic. But this was my first theological encounter about similarities and differences with a Christian; I wondered why I had not had more such discussions with friends – even clergy colleagues -- from other denominations other than what I'd learned I seminary.

That afternoon helped me appreciate that while the Southern Baptist Convention and the Episcopal Church are both centered on the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, we approached salvation differently and with almost different frames of reference. For both of us the basis is the Word of God, expressed in the Bible and manifest in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. At least we had that in common as we tested each other's understanding. Her concern seemed to be primarily with individual salvation. That is how she experienced her first direct encounter with Jesus, whereas I knew I had not framed mine in the same terms--not so much evidence of salvation as of mystical experience, grace, gift.

While I agreed that salvation was surely important, I suggested that we Anglicans live a bit more comfortably with mystery and leaving things such as salvation in the end up to God. Repeating the words *I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, I am someone who is saved* can seem almost like a magical formula, a right one receives if one makes the right decision, and a means of separating oneself out from others, as well as a statement of ultimate truth marking a particular moment in one's life.

And I talked about our sense that salvation is also ultimately collective and that all of creation was not only created by God but continues to respond to God, even if we are unaware of it. Christians are people who live with hope and it is in this hope that we are saved. The blessings we receive from God are more extravagant gift than measurable right. And yet the blessing, like all blessings of God, is ultimately not primarily about ourselves as individuals, but rather about God's purpose in using the ones God chooses to bless all the families of the earth. To stop at anything less—indeed, as Paul's letter to the Romans indicates, is to include less than all creation in God's salvation--and ultimately to limit the grace of God.

As Christians we are people who both accept the sufferings of this world but don't finally identify with them. In our letter from Paul to the Romans we have "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" and the expressed hope "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the

children of God." All of creation can be responsive to the Lord. Remember that Paul spent a good amount of his time jailed for his faith as a Christian and used this time to reach out to others and to deepen his faith. I suspect as someone well acquainted with suffering, Paul has authority when he writes "I consider that the sufferings of this present are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed." He uses the unusual and feminine analogy of labor pains to describe our journey with all creation to God.

But it was a blessing to have this talk with my sister in Christ. She was a woman who reads and loves the Bible -- something that is surely in decline in our culture, and so we have an increasing number of people who are biblically illiterate. At least our services in the Episcopal Church -- not customarily regarded by others as a bible-based church -- customarily include four passages from scripture -- more bible than many denominations that are rooted in the Bible belt.

In our passage from Genesis for today, Jacob encounters God on his journey toward Haran in the place where he spends the night. He has that famous dream. He marks his experience with a stone. Walter Brueggemann writes: "We children of the Enlightenment do not regularly linger over such elusive experiences as dreams. We seek to 'enlighten' what is before us and to overcome the inscrutable and the eerie in order to make the world a better, more manageable place. We do well in our management while we are awake, and we keep the light, power and control on 24/7..." And yet our dreams can move us beyond our initiative-taking management, once we realize that God through the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus can and does use dreams and other vehicles to communicate with us. Jacob's dream comes unbidden in his sleep, it's an "intrusion from beyond." Jacob sees God's angels, messengers in their constant movement between heaven and earth, and finds the Lord standing beside him -- on earth -- with powerful blessing and a promise to be with him always. It is only now for the first time that Jacob, when his defenses are down and his scheming at bay, seems to have any appreciation for God, for God's holy purposes and yearning to communicate, and for his involvement in God's amazing promises.

It is often said that the Episcopal or Anglican way of being in the world is deeply incarnational -- and this means that stuff, the matter of our lives, matters and that God had hallowed the whole world by creating and then walking upon it. So it is significant that this movement is between heaven and earth, not going only to heaven as if earth no longer matters. Jacob comes to appreciate that God's presence has made the very ground on which he is standing awesome -- he has encountered the house of God in the place on earth in which he stands and it is the gate of heaven. This is how we, too, should stand.

The third observation comes from the Gospel. Episcopalians and Anglicans, generally, are known as living the *via media* or middle way. While this can refer to our centrist position on the Christian spectrum, both continuing to embrace the Catholic tradition but also benefitting from the Protestant Reformation, it can also mean our moderation or tolerance and patience in many things, which some find frustrating and objectionable. It's not that we don't care about good and evil -- save or unsaved -- we *do* care -- but there is a sort of forbearance like the position taken in the gospel that has the master telling his slaves to leave the weeds growing with the good wheat, lest the good wheat also be uprooted in seeking to eradicate the weeds. In other

words, let this task of ultimate judgment be left to the angels (God's messengers) of the Son of Man at the end of the age.

I invite you think about what makes your life and your household distinctively Christian and Anglican. You might have those conversations with your Methodist, Presbyterian, Assembly of God friends and learn something from them. You might ask, then, what you have to commend to others and what is your hope. If you find there is nothing that you can distinctively claim, you might think further about what of your faith is most important to you and how you can make that incarnate in your life for the glory of God and the healing of the world which yearns to be set free.

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