

Sermon: “On Humility and Hope”

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Hope Church

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In Scotland, England, and Ireland it’s quite common to come upon standing stones or piles of rocks set up in fields or on hills. Tom and I saw any number of these “cairns” on our recent trip to Scotland, and we took lots of pictures. ) Well, to be honest, I took lots of pictures....) When we were regaling a friend with the photos from our trip, he noticed all the “rock pictures” and finally asked, “What’s up with this?”

He was probably sorry he’d asked by the time I’d finished my explanation. But here’s the gist of what I said. Think of these stones as historical markers—mute witnesses to the fact that something that was significant to someone happened here. We don’t always know what or who it was—in fact, we usually don’t—but the rock pile remains like a bookmark in time to alert others to the fact that there’s a really cool passage on this page.

Tom and I noticed that some of these cairns were quite new. So, something there is that *still* loves a standing stone. We still “raise our Ebenezer” (literally *rock* אבן of *help* עזר) when we want to mark an experience that has left its mark on us. And it’s usually less in testimony to our understanding of the experience than in recognition that we felt “awe” here. This marks the spot where God showed up and made a promise to us—US—the tiny specks clinging to a lonely planet in the midst of a vast explosion of galaxies. This marks what the ancient Celts called a “thin place”—where the boundaries between heaven and earth are especially porous.

When I mentioned this to Tom, he looked thoughtful for a moment, and then quoted a song by Peter Gabriel. It’s called Solsbury Hill (a location otherwise known as Stonehenge).

Climbing up on Solsbury Hill—I could see the city light  
Wind was blowing, time stood still—Eagle flew out of the night.  
He was something to observe—came in close, I heard a voice  
Standing stretching every nerve—I had to listen...had no choice.

So what are we to make of this? I’m not sure we should try to make anything of it by way of explanation. Maybe its enough simply to say that inside the Bible and out, there seems to be a recognition of certain places, certain moments when we

are struck dumb by awe—when we know ourselves to be in the presence of the infinite. And that these moments are all the more electrifying when we're not expecting them.

Jacob is certainly not expecting a close encounter of the divine kind when he sinks to his knees in exhaustion and feels around for a rock on which to rest his weary head. He is on the run from his brother Esau—whom he's swindled out of both his birthright and their father's blessing. Jacob is so anxious to put some distance between them that he forgets to look for a comfortable campsite while it is still light enough to look for one. The sun has set—so he settles for a spot that is close to hand. The place is nothing remarkable from his perspective. Yet one gets the sense that the story's narrator knows something that Jacob and we don't. The writer keeps referring to it—ominously, reverently—as “the place.” We discover why when Jacob dreams a dream. This is where it's tempting to quote another rock song—“Stairway to Heaven.” But suffice to say—the dream reveals that Jacob is in a “thin place”—a high traffic area between heaven and earth. He seems to have set up camp right at the base of the angels' escalator. But wait, there's more! All of a sudden, God shows up—spewing unexpected promises.

Jacob jolts awake and says something that could serve as a caption for a lot of life's experiences: “Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it.”

A couple of things strike me about this story. First, it reminds us that there's often a lot more going on than we realize. This is borne out by a tantalizing little detail at the end of the story. Verse 19 says that after it was all over, Jacob gave the place a new name. Its old name had been something pretty boring: Luz (almond tree). But its new name would reflect the reality Jacob now knew to be true. He called it *Bethel*—בֵּת אֵל—house of God.

How many times do we think we're in Luz when we're really in Bethel? What blinds us to the fact that the angels are going up and down the escalator and that God has set up camp right beside us? George Eliot says that most of the time we walk around “well-wadded in stupidity” [*Middlemarch*]. I'm sure that's true. But sometimes we're well-wadded with grief or pain or depression. Or sometimes it's pure arrogance—a refusal to realize that our perspective is limited—that we don't see the big picture that only God is privy to. In any case, this passage reminds us that there is often more going on than is dreamt of in our theology [paraphrase of a line from *Hamlet*]. It's a reality check about perspective—and that should leave us with a deep sense of awe and a large dose of humility.

The second thing that strikes me about this story is that God comes to us in our weakness. Jacob is hardly the picture of a potential patriarch in this story. He's in trouble with his dad, in cahoots with his mom, and on the lam from his brother. He's in the middle of a wilderness, scratching around in the dark for a place to lie down, and using a rock for his pillow. He's lonely, he's scared, and I'm guessing he's feeling really sorry for himself. But this is the moment God chooses to show up and promise him a future that will be a blessing not only to himself and his future offspring, but all the families of the earth. Jacob doesn't deserve either the visitation or the promise—but that's part of the point. It's not about Jacob—it's about God. It makes one wonder if maybe God waits for when we're vulnerable so we won't be tempted to take credit. Perhaps it's easier for God to get past our “padding” when our defenses are down.

We have to be careful here, or it will sound like we're trying to put a silver lining on suffering. Me, I'm always suspicious of people who try to tell me that weakness and suffering are a good thing. They're not—OK? And in my experience, people who try to tell you that suffering is a good thing have probably never been sick.

But sometimes, in the mysterious economy of God where nothing is ever wasted, God's power is made perfect in the context of our weakness.

This is part of what Paul seems to be saying to the poor suffering saints in Rome. He doesn't dismiss or try to downplay their suffering—but he does try to put it in perspective. And I can't help but hear echoes of Jacob's story in the way that he does it. Just as God showed up in the most mundane of places at “Luz,” so Christ shows up in the midst of our suffering and sanctifies it. Luz becomes Bethel. The rock that we'd been using for a pillow becomes our Ebenezer. Our misery is hallowed by Christ's company and we say, “Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.” There is a lot more going on here than we realize—and God has set up shop right smack in the midst of our suffering.

But wait, there's more. God leans over and starts whispering a promise into our ear. And it's a duzy. It has to do with the whole creation—which is groaning right along with us at the moment—but is even now caught up in God's scheme to create a new heaven and a new earth. In that new creation, “sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Is. 35:10) and “God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes” (Rev. 7:17). That's the promise, God whispers. Wait for it; hope in it. And in the mean time, view the present *through* the promise [title of hymn by Tom Troeger].

God's grand plan is the subject of the parable we read from Matthew. It's another parable about a sower (that's s-o-w-e-r). I briefly considered calling this sermon "Sow What?—the Sequel. I am going to take my cue from Gordon's sermon last week and give a slightly different interpretive spin on the parable than the one given in Scripture. This may seem brazen, but I figure if Gordon can get away with it, so can I! No really—one of the reasons parables are so powerful is that they are multi-valent. They're like gems that reveal different facets every time you hold them up to the light.

When we hold this one up to the light of today's passages, we see a picture of God as a frustrated farmer. The farmer sows good seed in a field, but then an enemy sneaks in over night and sows weeds among the wheat. Time passes, and soon this act of sabotage is obvious. The farmer sees the weeds and laments, "Surely, some enemy has done this." (Picture Dave and Doug surveying the crop of weeds in the church gardens.... Would this be a good time to mention the weeding and mulching fest on August 2 at 9AM?)

How many times throughout history has God looked at our wheat fields and seen weed fields? The first time was in the Garden of Eden. What had been planted was good—very good. But then one evening when God was taking a walk in the cool of the day, God realized that Adam and Even had gone missing. Were there weeds newly sprung up to give further evidence that things were no longer what they were supposed to be? God must have looked at the ruin of this good garden and said—with grief as well as anger—"Surely, some enemy has done this."

When God walks through the fields today, what must God see? What must God say? Starving children in Darfur—"Surely, some enemy has done this." Rape victims and machete wounds in Zimbabwe—"Surely, some enemy has done this." The throbbing wound that is Iraq—"Surely, some enemy has done this." The poverty that stalks our own streets—"Surely, some enemy has done this." The scan than shows the cancer has spread—"Surely, some enemy has done this."

We can take comfort in the fact that God suffers at these sights. But we can take even more comfort in the fact that God is taking steps to put a stop to such sights. Sin's presence in the world is a formidable enemy and cannot be rooted out easily or instantly. But it will be rooted out someday. That's the promise...the promise that God was willing to die for. The "wheat and the tares" may be "compactly grown" [phrase from a poem by Edwin Muir], but God will sort them out someday when the time is right and the harvest is ready.

Whenever there is a major disaster in the world, people show up on talk shows to ask the understandable questions: Where is God when this happened? How can God be good or powerful and allow this sort of thing? Perhaps you have asked those same questions standing beside a grave or sitting in a lawyer's office. Perhaps you ask them whenever you watch the news.

Our faith does not forbid such questions. (Read the book of Job or the psalms if you don't believe me.) But in the face of those questions that arise out of the paroxysm of our pain, God slips in beside us, leans down and whispers, "I'm here. I'm doing something about this. View the present through the promise."

And so we wait—in humility and hope—for that day when God will wipe away our tears...for that day when we will wake and say, "Surely, God is in this place and I did not know it."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—Amen.

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Prayer for Illumination:

Eternal God, in the reading of your Scripture,  
may your Word be heard;  
In the meditations of our hearts,  
may your Word be known;  
And in the faithfulness of our lives,  
may your Word be shown.