

Ordinary Time 16

*Sunday between
July 17 and 23 inclusive*

At first reading the four passages assigned for this Sunday seem to have very little in common with one another. Genesis 28 is the narrative of Jacob's encounter with God in a dream at Bethel, while Ps. 139 is a moving statement on the ubiquitous nature of God's presence, but beyond this specific reference not many connections are apparent. Romans 8 relates Paul's poetic reflection on a groaning world, and Matt. 13 relates the parable of the wheat and the weeds, or tares, and the injunction to patience about the presence of evil in the community.

And yet a careful consideration of the texts yields a certain common rhythm among three of them, providing a story of God's activity in deliverance, with the psalm offering a marvelously contemplative piece about the ever-present love of God.

First, the texts start with depictions of the social setting of God's activity. In Gen. 28 it is the loneliness of the bedouin Jacob who, in his solitude, experiences an unexpected encounter with God. In Rom. 8 it is the broader context of creation itself, animate and inanimate, groaning in travail out of a sense of incompleteness and bondage. God listens.

Second, the text tells of God's commission of human agents, weak and inadequate, to carry out the divine tasks. Jacob may not be totally aware of the plans God has in store for him, but the reader knows. Paul declares that the people in whom the Spirit of God dwells are very much in tune with the pain of creation. They experience its frustration and slavery, and they too long for God's final deliverance. Just at the point of the reluctance of God's agents to carry out the tasks, the parable from Matthew about the wheat and weeds gives hope. The main reason for hesitancy is the sense of one's own impurity, unfitness, and mixed motives. Such a weakness cannot be overlooked, but at the level of the community it is not to be a cause for paralysis. God will take care of the weeds in God's own time.

Meanwhile, the present is a moment for risk, for venturing, for boldness (as the two adjoining parables in Matthew suggest).

Next, the texts call for a future that is hope-filled. But hope is not shallow optimism, nor is it only to be claimed in the fourth quarter when your side has built up a massive lead. "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" (Rom. 8:24). The unknown beckons Jacob. Only God can effect deliverance. Yet hope is vested in God.

Finally, we hear the introspective rejoicing of the psalmist, who praises God for the revelation of God as a merciful and gracious deity.

Genesis 28:10–19a

Fear and assurance, ignorance and certainty, isolation and community—these are among the polarities that are set against each other in this text, in each case the first, negative condition being resolved in favor of the second, positive one. Jacob leaves the family home in Beer-sheba after having skillfully and maliciously maneuvered his older brother out of the birthright and the blessing that were rightfully Esau's. The resulting estrangement causes Esau to plot Jacob's death (Gen. 27:41), which, in turn, leads Rebekah to arrange for her favored son's hasty departure. But Jacob's fear is, if not entirely quenched, at least diminished by his vision of the ascending and descending angels of God. Esau's hand may be against him, but at least God is accessible, and that is no small comfort to the fugitive's spirit.

Up to this point in the story of Isaac's two sons, the young men are presented by the text in quite secular terms. Unlike Abraham, who frequently prayed and worshiped, and even Isaac—a shadowy figure—who at least knew how and when to invoke the name of the Deity (Gen. 27:27–28), Esau and Jacob have betrayed little sense of the role of God in their or their family's lives. Jacob's motivation, sly fox that he is, is basically greed, while poor, fumbling Esau is portrayed as a foil for his sibling's schemes. But at Bethel Jacob encounters the living God and life begins to assume a different perspective. Ignorant Jacob has found the gateway to God's dwelling, of that he is certain, and his new assurance is reflected in the name that he confers on the spot: Bethel, the House of God (28:19a). The use of this proper name, in fact, has been anticipated in vs. 16–17, where the newly enlightened Jacob cries, "Surely Yahweh is in this place—and I did not know it! . . . This is none other than the house of God (*bêt 'ēlōhîm*), and this is the gate of heaven."

But more important than either of these resolutions of polarities is that which involves the movement from isolation to community. The text implies that, were it not for the intervention of Rebekah (Gen. 27:42–45), Esau, the skillful hunter, would by now have murdered the wily introvert Jacob (25:27). Jacob is not only a fugitive, but, like many fugitives, he is a “loner.” There is no other family member, not even a servant, in attendance as he makes his way across the countryside. How totally unexpected, then, are Yahweh’s opening words to the outcast, pointing as they do in both genealogical directions: “I am Yahweh. I am the God of your ancestors and I am the God of your descendants.” Suddenly the solitary Jacob, a refugee from his own community, is not only described in communal terms, but is portrayed as being the focus of that community, the interface between his community’s past and its future.

And it is in the context of affirming this community that the text makes its boldest claim. The promise to Abraham, expressed in Gen. 12:3, is here renewed and vested in Jacob. “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring” (v. 14). He who contrived to gain an undeserved birthright and blessing is now described as the one through whom the entire human family will receive blessing! Yet this is no accident, no “fluke” of history. It is the unfolding intention of God who, Jacob’s unsavory character notwithstanding, promises to accompany the fugitive in order to ensure his safety and well-being. The solitary Jacob is solitary no more: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (v. 15).

This turning point in Jacob’s life thus becomes a moment of renewal in the history of God’s dealings with all humankind. For his part, Jacob never renounces his crafty ways, cleverly repaying Laban’s trickery in the matter of the older man’s daughters (29:21–30) with some skulduggery of his own (30:37–43). But his life is never again lived apart from God’s claims, and he will later demand of his family the same devotion to the God of Bethel that he learned at that sacred spot (35:1–4). All of which is a cogent reminder of the power of the Spirit of God to reshape and reorient human life. Jacob was not an entirely new person, but neither was he the same old Jacob. The change of his name to Israel (32:28; 35:10) signifies a deeper, more profound recasting of his values, a reordering rooted in the Bethel experience.

But the vision of God at Bethel also represents a reaffirmation of God’s commitment to all humankind and stands as a model of the manner in which God may work. It has been often observed of this text that it illustrates a repeated motif in Genesis, that of the renewal of God’s imperiled promise, a promise that is often endangered from

a number of quarters, in this instance the sinfulness of the heir to the promise. Beyond that, however, the text also affirms that in the matter of God’s saving interaction with people, the initiative lies with God, our faithfulness (even when it is partial, as was Jacob’s) being a response occasioned by God’s compassionate intrusion into our sinful ways. Jacob contributes little to the Bethel experience, except (and what an enormous “except” it is) to say yes to the living God. Not only did Jacob not contribute to God’s presence at Bethel, he was not even aware of what was about to happen (28:16).

Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24

This most remarkable psalm offers some of the most intense communion with God that is found anywhere in the Psalter. It is a prayer that does not ask for anything, as do the petitionary prayers, but is itself an act of engagement in which the speaker ponders aloud the presence of God, the mystery and miracle of being a subject of God’s attention.

The psalm begins (vs. 1–6) aware of the reality that this is a God “from whom no secrets are hid.” The psalm employs a vocative address to Yahweh, to whom the whole of the psalm is addressed. It is Yahweh, the one who acts in history, who cuts through all pretense and deception to see the true character of the one who prays. The first four verses are dominated by the verb “know” (vs. 1, 2, 4), reinforced by a series of active verbs: “search . . . discern . . . search . . . [be] acquainted with.” The description of God’s penetrating awareness utilizes three verbs: “when I sit down . . . when I rise up . . . my lying down.” The verbs “sit,” “rise,” “lie down” intend to portray all human actions, all times and places (on which see also Deut. 6:7 and Judg. 5:10). There is nothing that can be hidden from God, and therefore there is nothing that we need try to hide. The speaker is not resistant or petulant about this reality, but simply ponders what is taken to be true and awesome.

In v. 5, the knowledge that God has is moved to more physical imagery: “hem in . . . lay hand upon.” That is, the speaker is completely surrounded by God and held in God’s firm grasp. This life is dominated by the reality of God, perhaps wishing for but eschewing every dimension of independence or autonomy from God.

The response of the speaker to this inescapable redefinition of reality again uses a form of “know” (v. 6). The speaker is dazzled by the awareness that life is saturated with God. (In Job 7:11–21, the same reality is acknowledged, but with hostility.)

From knowledge of the inescapability of this God, the reflection of the psalmist now focuses on God's presence (vs. 7–12). This is not God's presence that is mystically available by intentional human seeking. This is rather a presence that is active and intrusive. Now the rhetoric employs spatial imagery: God is present in heaven, in Sheol, and in the sea (vs. 8–9). Sheol is not hell, but refers to the hidden places in the core of the earth. The three terms voice the physical extremities of creation. This is not a God who is "present everywhere," in some indwelling sense, but one who is actively in pursuit of the speaker and turns up wherever the speaker goes.

It is not clear why the speaker wants to flee from God (v. 7). Perhaps it is fear of God's demanding way; but there is no hint of that. More likely, it is a yearning for independence, not wanting life to be crowded by and dominated by the reality of God.

It turns out, however, that God's presence is friendly and positive. The speaker discovers that the God who cannot be escaped is a God who "leads" and who "holds me fast" (v. 10). The verb "lead" most often means to guide safely in order to protect and to bring to well-being (cf. Deut. 8:2–4; Ps. 23:2–3). To "hold fast" (or grasp) often means to hold in order to keep from falling or straying into danger or being vulnerable (cf. Ps. 73:23–24). Thus, in every and all places, the inescapable God is protective, and therefore the speaker is safe. The speaker cannot get beyond God's protective presence.

And even if the speaker tries to hide from God in the darkness, a fleeing into the disorder that seems to be beyond God's good governance, this is no adequate hiding. The God who goes to heaven, Sheol, and the sea is not put off even by the darkness, which seems beyond God's rule. This God is perfectly capable of operating effectively in the darkness, unencumbered. Indeed, God's decisive presence makes darkness undark, and night becomes as day (cf. John 1:5). It is all the same to God. All of life is under this relentless sovereign and subject to the God who holds sway over all of creation.

In the final verses of the psalm, the speaker, after this sweeping reflection, utters a first petitionary prayer (vs. 23–24). But it is a different kind of petition than those found in most of the psalms. The words return to the initial verses of the psalm. What was a declaration in vs. 1–2 now becomes an imperative:

You have searched me . . . search me;
 [You have] known me . . . know my heart;
 You discern my thoughts . . . test me;
 You know it completely . . . know my thoughts.

The speaker now submits to the sovereign rule of God. But this is not a submission accepted because it is inevitable. Rather, the speaker appeals to God to conduct a complete investigation, confident that God will declare the speaker innocent (v. 24). Innocence is anticipated, without "any wicked way in me." The speaker is confident in self and is glad to be examined by God and acquitted. The outcome of such innocence is to be led in an "everlasting" (=continually reliable) path, that is, on a safe, protected journey, which constitutes life. One can see that what dazzled the speaker at the beginning now becomes a source of comfort, reassurance, and well-being (v. 24).

This psalm is an amazing statement of the power, certitude, and confidence that come in a God-centered life. The God who is inescapable becomes a profound source of strength and well-being. Such a God is an amazing possibility in a time like ours. We are beset with the temptation to autonomy, to going it alone. As counter to that option, many are tempted to embrace a god who is either maudlin or coercive. The God of this psalm, however, is neither of these. This God offers sure life and well-being, even in the face of threat and danger. Now life begins anew, in honest, submissive, dazzling, trusting communion. No need to try to hide from God what in any case is known by God.

Romans 8:12–25

Paul opens today's passage from Rom. 8 with the powerful imagery of indebtedness, with its connotation of being under obligation to another person or group, which helps him amplify his understanding of the conflicting arenas of flesh and Spirit. Verse 13 states the consequences of that indebtedness, since those who live in the realm of the flesh inevitably die.

Although Paul never returns to the logic of v. 12 to complete the statement, the implication is clear: those who live by the Spirit are debtors of the Spirit, debtors of God. Since he elsewhere speaks of his own obligation to God (1 Cor. 9:16) and of himself and others as slaves of God (Rom. 6:22; 1 Cor. 7:22), there can be little doubt that he would use the strong language of indebtedness to apply to believers. Nevertheless, this particular passage extols with soaring language God's rich gifts to believers and their hope for the future, and for that reason Paul may have avoided the obvious conclusion that believers are debtors of the Spirit.

Instead of using the language of debt, v. 14 shifts to imagery of

childhood and adoption. Those “who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” The Spirit they have received is not a “spirit of slavery” but a “spirit of adoption” (v. 15). This contrast imagines believers as children who have been adopted into a household. Even if they did not originally belong within the household, adoption assures them continued standing and ongoing nurture. Whatever belongs to the household will eventually be theirs.

The brief statement about the believers’ cry to God (vs. 15–16) warrants close examination: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” What Paul offers in this passage is not simply an abstract, logical analysis in which believers *function* like children of God. He addresses, instead, a kind of intuitive knowledge that comes to expression in the heart’s longing for God. The cry to God as one’s parent, the desire for God that can only be conveyed as a plea—these subjective experiences confirm the theological argument Paul is making.

By virtue of their adoption as God’s children, believers become both “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (v. 17). This relationship with Christ appears earlier in the passage, when Paul compares Jesus’ resurrection from the dead with that which awaits believers (v. 11). Here, the believers’ co-heirship with Christ requires that believers suffer with Christ (v. 17). To share in Christ’s sonship means that one is subject to the sufferings of Christ. To share in Christ’s sonship also means, as the end of v. 17 indicates, that eventually believers will be glorified with Christ.

For Paul, suffering is real and present among believers, as it is in creation as a whole. While human beings themselves cause much suffering and can challenge and overturn those forms of suffering, acting on the basis of confidence in God and solidarity with one another, there is also suffering that arises from death itself, a power that no human being can overthrow or escape.

Paul knows full well the power of death and the suffering it can inflict, but he nevertheless asserts in this passage that the glory that awaits in God’s final triumph is so magnificent that it cannot even be compared with present suffering. The two are of different orders: “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

Is this reference to the glory to be revealed in the future simply a strategy of denial? Is Paul offering “pie in the sky by and by,” in order to encourage people to live for the future and ignore the present? While it is true that Paul insists on *both* the reality of suffering *and* God’s final triumph over that suffering, his understanding of the fu-

ture is not an escape hatch from the present. Indeed, he emphasizes the reality of suffering by connecting human suffering with that of creation itself.

What does Paul mean when he refers to “the creation”? The Greek word *ktisis*, like the English word “creation,” refers to that which has been made. That is, Paul refers here to everything that is made, everything that is not God. Humanity does not exist on its own, set apart from nature, but the two exist in some interconnected relationship with each other.

As he works to express the situation of creation at present, Paul uses the powerful imagery of labor pains (v. 22). He probably comes to this imagery by means of other Jewish literature of this period, which frequently compares times of tribulation and trial with the anguish of a woman who is in childbirth. In Rom. 8, however, it is not the mother (“creation”) who will bring the new babe into existence. Instead, all of creation waits together for God to free it, to reveal God’s children, to bring about redemption.

If all of creation waits to “be set free from its bondage to decay” and longs for redemption, the question that naturally arises is whether that longing is simply an empty fantasy. Paul here returns to the problem introduced by v. 18: how is it possible to be confident about the future? The answer to that question occupies most of the remainder of Rom. 8, but Paul begins to address it in this particular passage by means of a reflection on the meaning of hope.

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Perhaps more than any other Gospel, Matthew deals with practical, human problems, the kinds of problems confronted every day by individual Christians and by local communities. Matters like anger, sexual behavior, divorce, hypocrisy, taxes, church discipline, and the power of possessions figure prominently in the narrative. Readers might not like what the text says, but they cannot argue that Matthew is abstract or that the Gospel avoids routine, down-to-earth issues.

Such is the case with today’s reading—Jesus’ parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:24–30) and the resulting interpretation (13:36–43). Who has not wrestled with the paradoxical character of a congregation, where committed members with perceptive visions about what the church ought to be and to do exist side by side with those who are indifferent or who apparently are motivated only by self-interest? It is not an idle matter, because often the opinions of the

latter prevail over the opinions of the former, and the whole congregation is affected. Who has not wanted to be rid of the bad apples that spoil the barrel?

The parable, which so eloquently addresses the mixture of the good and not-so-good in the church, operates with the same language and imagery as the parable of the sower and the seed, which precedes it. Only now, a new character has entered the picture—an enemy who alongside the good seed sows weeds. The parable does not debate the role of the enemy or contest his presence, but rather focuses on two responses to the effects of his work. First, the workers become alarmed at the sight of weeds sprouting among the wheat. They are edgy. They are perplexed as to where the weeds came from. They seem even to harbor doubts about the householder and whether the seed he sowed was really “good” seed. When the workers are told that an enemy is responsible for the weeds, they want to take matters into their own hands and pull up the weeds to maintain a pure crop. Their response is understandable.

Second, there is the householder, who doesn’t seem surprised or agitated about the weeds, but urges the workers to be patient. It is not that the householder is indifferent to the weeds or doesn’t care. Rather, he knows what to do with weeds—turn them over to the reapers at harvesttime, who can properly separate them from the wheat. Any premature “weeding” is bound to damage the wheat as well.

Even without the allegorical glossary with which to interpret the parable (13:37–39), readers are confronted with its double-edged impact. On the one hand, the nervousness that makes us want to banish recalcitrant members from the church is exposed as foolhardy, if not arrogant. Church discipline has its place (and Matthew is not opposed to church discipline; see 18:15–20), but it has to be tempered with the long look, which leaves ultimate judgment in the hands of the ultimate Judge. A zealotness to purify the church, even when some purification might yield a stronger community, is called into question. It too easily presumes that the purifiers have perfect vision and neglects the fact that they will likely uproot wheat along with weeds.

On the other hand, the parable, in the imagery of the apocalyptic tradition, confronts the readers with the final judgment, and the mention of judgment invariably evokes existential uncertainty. Where do I stand in terms of the coming separation? Matthew’s story persistently calls not just for talk, but also for deed (for example, 7:21–27). At the same time, deeds by themselves can be pure hypocrisy unless they cohere with an inner commitment (for example,

7:17–20). There has to be a consistency between thought and deed, between motivation and action. The final judgment exposes that critical relationship and brings to light what otherwise is easily concealed.

Without entirely dissolving the anxiety created by the expectation of judgment, the parable, located where it is, nevertheless pushes beyond mere worry. The parable of the wheat and weeds and its parallel, the parable of the net (13:47–50), function as brackets around two other parables (vs. 44–46). One of those parables describes the joyful pursuit of treasure hidden in a field; the other tells of a merchant who sells all he has to purchase “one pearl of great value.”

In light of the coming judgment, the present is not a time of paralyzing nail-biting, but a time of risk, of joyful ventures taken, of discovering what is really valuable, of a boldness not intimidated by the fear of failure, of a persistence in pursuit of the coming reign of God. And the Son of man who sends his angels to effect judgment (13:41) is the Son of man who on earth forgave sins freely, who suffered at the hands of betrayers, and who confirms for us that God’s gracious promises can be trusted.