

Lectionary 16 A, July 19, 2020

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I have a vague recollection of a popular TV series that my parents liked to watch when I was a kid. It was called *The Fugitive* and the series starred David Jansen as a fellow who was wrongly accused of committing a murder. He wasn't just running from something he was running to something. He knew who the identity of the real criminal and was on a quest to catch him. Viewers found themselves rooting for the fugitive as he grew one step closer in each episode to catching up with the real culprit.

Jacob is on the run. As we hear in today's first reading, Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, is a fugitive. Yet, it is highly unlikely that you are rooting for this fugitive. Jacob is as guilty as guilty can be. Jacob is on the run because his brother Esau is out to get him.

Last Sunday, we heard how Jacob tricked his brother into selling his birthright to Jacob. We see why Jacob is called "the trickster." He tricked his brother. The birthright is supposed to go to the firstborn. Jacob managed to get it through manipulation and deception. So, when Isaac, his father, was old and blind, Jacob deceived him and received the blessing that properly belonged to Esau. You see, once the blessing was given it was irrevocable. Esau found out what happened. He was furious. Esau vowed to kill his brother Jacob.

Maybe "trickster" is too polite a word. Jacob is a crook. He is not a nice person but his mother, Rebekah warns him that Esau is out to get him. She

tells him to flee, to run and tells him to head to Haran where her brother Laban lives and to stay there, giving time for Esau to calm down.

So, at the outset of today's lesson from Genesis, we find Jacob, our fugitive, has nowhere to place his head. On the run from home and on his way toward Haran he needs a place to sleep one night. He finds himself in the middle of somewhere and since he is without a pillow, takes a stone and rests his head on the stone and falls into a deep sleep and as he sleeps, he has a most amazing dream.

In the dream, angels are ascending and descending on a ladder that reaches from heaven to earth. Through the dream God speaks and promises Jacob land and descendants and assures Jacob that he will not be abandoned. God will be with him. It is a promise without stipulation. Although, at this point in the story we would like to see Jacob get his comeuppance, God does not pass judgment on Jacob. God simply meets Jacob where he is and promises, without condition, to be with always be with him.

Over these weeks, as we journey through the book of Genesis and the narrative of God's chosen people, we learn a couple of things – that God's people are like you and me, flawed and imperfect. Some, like Jacob are more than flawed. They're downright crooked. We also learn something about God. What the great narrative in Genesis reveals about God is that God will not abandon the people with whom God has made a covenant.

God is determined to see this thing through and though Abraham or Sarah or Isaac or Jacob or whomever may show little to no fidelity toward God, God is completely faithful to God's people and will never let them go.

This is what is revealed to Jacob in his dream. To get even more specific, Jacob learns that though he is away from home and on the run and in a strange place, God is still with him. Wherever Jacob goes, God is with him, even in that place where he set up camp. So, Jacob takes the stone he used as a pillow for his head and pours oil on it and sets it up on a pillar and he names the place Bethel. The word "Bethel" means "God is in this place."

Did you catch Jacob's absolute joy and astonishment when he wakes up from his dream? "Surely, the Lord is in the place and I didn't know it!"

"How awesome is this place! It is none other than the house of God."

This place, the place of Jacob's dream where God revealed God's self is an awesome place.

We may not be on the run but like Jacob but surely find ourselves in a kind of in-between time. Many times, I've heard folks describe this time of pandemic as a period of displacement. Our sense of place has been skewed or changed. Many have lost their jobs. Some are working now at home. Summer camps have been cancelled. Vacations have been canceled or the destinations have changed or sorely altered. We haven't been able to visit friends in the same ways. We haven't been able to meet at school or church.

There is a real sense of displacement – being away from places that are life-giving - and with that experience of displacement comes a sense of being disoriented.

We miss our special places, our sacred places. We need these places ... like this place.

We know this to be a place of special encounter with God. And it isn't so much because of the brick and mortar. This is the place where God gathers us as the body of Christ. This is the place where we gather as Assembly. The place where we hear and see the splashing water. The place where we hear the word of God and speak and sing in response to the good news and sing out our praises. This is the place where we gather to meet Jesus in sharing bread and cup together.

I miss being with you in this place. Surely, this is an awesome place.

We look forward to the day when we can gather again in this place and we will, quite likely in Phase 3, begin to meet for worship in a socially distanced and safe and healthy ways. Until that time, we likely feel the pangs of displacement, of being away from this place for it is a special place. I wonder, though, in this time if you've discovered a new sense of God's presence in other places.

Maybe like Jacob you've discovered the presence of God in unlikely places, places you never expected God to show up.

Having worked from home a lot over these past months, I've felt a lot of that disorientation. I have also discovered in that disorientation or displacement a hidden gift. In some real ways, I've been reoriented to our neighborhood, our yard, our home, and our neighbors. Life before the pandemic was busier in the sense of bouncing back and forth to meetings and visits and events. When it seems like I'm "beating the clock" or "running to catch u" it often prevents me from noticing the grandeur of God and the love of God in people, places or things I often take for granted.

One of the things I've been doing these past several weeks is taking our dog, Sally, for some long walks and I've discovered a beautiful trail not far from where we live. The trail has become a place to get rigorous and enjoyable exercise and a path along which I can listen to favorite podcasts or listen to nothing at all save the birds or the distant traffic. It has become a place to pray. With Jacob, I've been able to say "Surely this is an awesome place! Surely God is in this place and I didn't know it!"

We trust that God is everywhere and, as we like to pray, it is always a good and right thing to give God thanks and praise in all places. Still, it behooves us to take notice where God might be showing up in places you might have taken for granted or places you least expect to discover God.

Now, I don't want to romanticize any of this. A pandemic isn't easy for us and it's really, really hard for many folks who are suffering a lot more than me. In our fast from Sunday worship or in our fasting from other places we've been prevented from visiting, we have perhaps felt a deeper sense of solidarity for people for whom displacement is a way of life. In fact, one of the original purposes of a fast is to be in public solidarity with those who grieve or are sick or in want.

Most every day, when I take Sally on the long walk along the trail, we pass at least two homeless encampments. Each walk opens my eyes to neighbors in need. A hidden gift in this time of displacement may be this – that we find ourselves on the precipice of deep and lasting change, the kind of change that will unhook us from excessive materialism or consumerism whatever it is that prevents us from being connected to our neighbor. Maybe our Bethel dreams have led us to new awakenings.

Jacob had this dream right in the midst of his displacement and God spoke and this led Jacob to a kind of new orientation. Surely, a reorientation for his journey “on the run” but for all his future days. Yes, even this trickster, received from God pure promise and gift and it led him to set up an altar and move forward in the confidence of this promise.

What Jacob does with that is another story, but we'll leave that for next week and the weeks to come.

As we await the time when we can come together again around the font, the Word, and around the table, where might we discover our Bethel places. It might not be easy to see because, well, as Jesus reminds us in the parable, our gardens are filled with wheat AND weeds. There are no perfect places. No pure places. No wonderlands. And isn't that the beauty of God who has promised to never forsake us and in Jesus Christ has come to us?

Every place and ever heart is a mixture of wheat and weeds. Still, God is there and God promises to be there wherever we are. Jacob took the stone where he rested his head and made it into an altar. Where is that place for you, even in your displacement and where is that place for someone you know and where might God be calling you to make a place a sacred and holy place for someone else who is incredibly displaced?

Lately, I've been having conversations with my mother who has had more than her share of disorientation and displacement. As her memory fades, events in the distant past seem more lucid for her than things that happened just yesterday.

Recently, she reflected on an experience she had as a child. It was during World War II when Japanese Americans were placed in Internment camps. What is now the Puyallup Fairgrounds was one of those internment camps. One of her best friends was suddenly no longer in school because she was placed in that camp. My Mom, for the life of her, could not understand why and it was only some years later that it was explained. She missed her friend a

lot. To say that her friend was experiencing some displacement is a bit of an understatement.

Once she got wind of where her friend was and found out that she could visit her friend by standing outside the fence of the Internment camp, she and another friend were determined to go see her. It was a confusing, disorienting, sad and troubled time for everyone involved.

So, more than once, my Mom and another friend walked about three miles to the fairgrounds and three miles back so they could go greet their friend who peered through the open slots through the open slots through the fence and reaching her arms out was able to touch my Mom's hand the hand of her other friend.

It was a horrible situation to be placed in a veritable prison just because of your race, to be suddenly uprooted from your home, not sure what to make of it all. But I wonder, if just in that small gesture of touching the hand of my Mom and another friend, if that little girl was given a visible and tangible sign of hope that surely even there, God was in that place. *Amen.*