

“Between a Rock and a Holy Place”
Genesis 28:10-19a and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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Preached July 20, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

Tonight’s text from Genesis is a weigh station on the highway of the Hebrew Patriarchs, a point of transition and taking stock, a minute of breath-catching in the midst of an intense chase. Jacob is on the run, you know, from his brother Esau from whom Jacob has tricked both the birthright and the all-important paternal blessing. He and his mother Rebekah, who always did favor the rascal Jacob, have lied to Isaac and schemed to get for Jacob what rightfully belonged to Esau. And fearing for the life of her darling son, she sends Jacob on his way to find a wife among the people of Abraham’s family, with her brother Laban. The whole story unfolds fast and furious, a story of deception and cunning, an ancient, if somewhat more benign, John Gresham thriller.

And after today’s text, after Jacob’s respite, the action picks up again only this time it will feature Jacob’s more amorous side. And his confrontation with Laban. And then on to a name change, a reunion with Esau, and a life rearing twelve sons and a daughter. But for a brief moment, as we come to our text today, Jacob lays down his head on the desert floor, adjusts his headcovering to keep the scorpions out of his ear and fidgets a little when he can’t get comfortable. But comfort is not far: hey, there’s a rock the size of a pillow upon which to rest his spinning head. His rest comes, but not before he longs for the tents of his family

and the laughter around mealtimes, the early mornings when he might have spent a quiet moment with his mother who loved him so. But he has traded all of these family moments in for power and gain and it is time to make the payments on his newly acquired privileges. Blessed as he may have been, a stone pillow is, after all, still a stone pillow. And as he slid off into sleep, little did he know he was between a rock and a holy place.

A stone pillow. Is it an ironic oxymoron or just poetic justice that one such as Jacob who has tricked and schemed his way through life must spend a night after which two capsules of Tylenol will be urgently needed but nowhere to be found? How utterly paradoxical and even whimsical of the tellers of this story to set the stage in this way for this miserable night Jacob will spend. Anyone who says that the Bible is a humorless document must have missed this passage, for Jacob leads the parade among the great paradoxical figures of the Bible. This man who cheated his brother *and* his father *and* his father-in-law is rewarded with the blessing reserved for Abraham and Isaac. He receives the promise of God's presence - "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go," says the Lord." The promise given to Abraham of land and blessing and offspring as numerous as the stars is now entrusted to Jacob. But how can this be? What kind of God would permit the glorification of someone who doesn't play by the rules? What kind of sick paradox is it when the bad guy not only gets away with his evil

deeds but the profits as well? Hardly a Hollywood ending.

It's pretty much unexplainable, this divine unfairness. It's the kind of unfairness that victims and survivors of natural disaster's often face. It's the kind of unfairness that the deserving Olympic athletes and high school football teams who don't win must carry. It's the kind of unfairness that survivors of child sexual abuse must confront years later. It's the kind of unfairness that AIDS patients who cannot afford the outrageously expensive treatments must endure as their bodies fail them one system at a time. And it is the kind of unfairness that I was forced to examine in ninth grade when some local idiot stole a stop sign at an intersection somewhere in Ohio and one of my closest friends died as a truck slammed into a van carrying her and nine other students on a science trip. My friend Wendy was about the most harmless individual you could hope to meet. She was a brilliant student, a loyal friend, a teenager who gives teenagers a good name. I received a call from a classmate I barely knew asking had I heard about Wendy and the others. I was dumbfounded and waited agonizingly for the eleven o' clock news and there was her face on TV. You know that TV is all about action and about the only time they show someone in a still photograph on TV is when they are dead. And so, as her photograph flashed on the screen, the inevitable questioned formed in my ninth grade mind. Why her? Why wasn't it the young punks who beat me up in fifth grade. Or the people on my paper route who didn't pay me for weeks at a

time. Or my gym teacher, Mr. Price, who liked to paddle people. These were the people I wanted dead, the ones who deserved it. Not the one person who deserved it the least. I'm not sure I had a good idea in ninth grade what the word paradox meant, but I knew unfairness when I saw it.

If we are honest with our selves, we know that the question of "Why me" is one we've all asked. And if you are like me, there is really no satisfactory answer. Not least that God wanted it to turn out that way. That is the proverbial salt on the wound. But the story we read about Jacob seems to suggest that God not only doesn't have to answer the "why" question but may in fact be behind the unfairness. This is the bitter pill of the Bible, a difficult perspective to swallow.

But perhaps there is some sugar to help the medicine go down. I think I have shared with you once before the story of one Gerald Sittser, but it is a perspective worth hearing more than once. Gerald Sittser, lost his wife, his young daughter, *and* his mother in an automobile accident and confronted this achingly difficult question of "why." Sittser's story was no more or less spectacular than any other why story but it was his perspective on it that was profound yet in the end, simple, given our Christian tradition. Sittser turned the question of "why me" on its head and instead asked, "Why not me?" Yes, he suffered a great loss. Yes, his hopes and dreams were dashed. But after reflecting on his tragedy, this is what he says: "So why not me? Can I expect to live an entire lifetime free of disappointment and

suffering? Free of loss and pain? The very expectation strikes me as not only unrealistic but also arrogant. God spare me from such a perfect life.”

I think Sittser’s perspective is one that comes as a shock to the system because we are used to thinking that life is fair, that we deserve to lead a happy, productive life. And I’m not sure I would use his insight when consoling someone facing their own tragedy because Sittser’s perspective comes with some distance, rather like finally seeing the forest after walking among the tall trees. But as we think about these tough questions in the moments we don’t have to face them directly, I think he is on the right track when he begins to look at his question in terms of grace. He goes on to say this: “The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved.” I’ll say it again: “The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved.”

Surely *Jacob* is undeserving of grace. Surely he of the machinations and the trickery and the opportunism is one of “them,” the undeserving of grace. But our text tells us that despite all that Jacob did and all that he will do in upcoming chapters of Genesis, God chose him to continue what God had begun with Abraham. If anyone ever tells you that there is no grace in the Old Testament, point them in the direction of the Jacob saga! If Jacob got what he deserved, the

story would have been over before it began. Be that as it may, God's granting of grace to Jacob leaves us to ponder the dimensions of God's grace, or, as it seems sometimes, the lack thereof. And so it is here then where we might take a closer look at that stone pillow. You see, more than just a witty oxymoron, the stone pillow becomes a marker of paradox. Here is a place where something remarkable took place, a place where treachery is rewarded but also a place where Jacob can say "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God." And for that reason, when Jacob turns this pillow of paradox on its end and makes a pillar of it, it becomes for us an invitation to ambiguity, a monument to the mystifying grace of God. You see, the ancient Israelites could no more explain what made the likes of Jacob worthy in the eyes of God than we can and their storytellers incorporated the ambiguity into the tales of their heroes.

Ambiguity is not a pretty word in our society. Ambiguity seems to be the antithesis of everything we have so carefully worked toward, everything we go to school for. It is certainty we want and certainty can only come with control, with mastery of all the elements and all the variables. Ambiguity causes chaos. Ambiguity signals something lurking in a dark alley, waiting to surprise us and pounce on us when we aren't looking. Ambiguity is reserved for the weak, for those who cannot control their own destiny and direction. But I think the Biblical witness makes clear that this notion of absolute certainty in all affairs is a modern

one. For the Israelites, the only certainties were God and the promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The rest was left up in the air, for each generation to analyze the ambiguities and the paradoxes. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds there is certainty: “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin, and all evildoers,” and “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father,” but in the meantime, the weeds must grow alongside the wheat, a growing season of ambiguity preceding the certainty of the harvest.

Embracing ambiguities is a frightening business because it goes against everything we have been taught in a modern world. But embracing ambiguities can be a liberating experience when we open ourselves to the possibility. It wasn't so long ago that we thought that the race question was a rather unambiguous one. Blacks were blacks and whites were white and never the twain shall meet. But the blurring of the race line has created an ambiguity that our society is wrestling with. There is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female. The world is much less categorized than we would like to think, especially where Jesus Christ is concerned. Grace is the great leveler of certainty and the unqualified call for ambiguity. I for one would leave behind the need for certainty beyond knowing that God loves me.

I will leave Gerald Sittser the last word: “So, God spare us a life of fairness!

To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering.” Amen.