

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 28:10-19a

^{28:10} Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." ¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ^{19a} He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Commentary

This text begins with Jacob running for his life. He had continued, with his mother's help, to lie and cheat his way into the full blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau. On the way, in the vicinity of Bethel, he finally fell exhausted into sleep. Jacob dreamed that a ziggurat (stepped pyramid), or a stairway, or a ramp (the Hebrew can have any of those meanings) reached from earth to heaven. He saw angels going up and down the ladder, then God came to him in his dream. Jacob was changed in some ways by this encounter. Before, he had known God by story and not by experience. Jacob responded to this dream in some concrete ways. He set up his stone pillow as a "pillar"—in this, the ordinary had become sacred. Standing stones were familiar in Israel as signs of God's presence. The oil that Jacob poured over it would discolor it

and also signify it as “holy.” God surprises us in many ways, and in this way, we remember that more often we recognize God in retrospect rather than in prospect.

Reflection

What places have been a “Beth-el” (house of God) for you where you have experienced God’s presence in a powerful way?

Romans 8:12-25

^{8:12} So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – ¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. ¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Commentary

Paul wrote his letters by dictating them to a secretary, who then wrote out the letter on parchment from his notes and sent it off by messenger to the city where the recipients lived. As he dictated, Paul often digressed and then returned to his main thought. Even without the digression, his sentences were frequently long and complicated. In his complex way, Paul here writes of the presence of God in our lives. The word for father that Jesus taught his disciples to use is a much more intimate word than the formal “father.” Simply to be able to say “Abba” is a recognition that we are God’s children, that we have entered into a new relationship with the Father, and with Jesus Christ, who is also our Father, and brother.

Reflection

Is God a “father” to you? If not, what image speaks to you?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

^{13:24} He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

^{13:36} Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Commentary

Here is another instance where Jesus explains a parable about agriculture, but only to his disciples. This seems strange. They all lived in a rural area. Even fishermen and tax collectors would have been aware of the realities of farming. They saw it all around them. Why would they have needed an explanation of something so familiar? The key to the interpretation is the second sowing, done by the enemy. Both the parable and the interpretation say that the separation of true from false is God's business and has to wait until the time of judgment. There were disagreements about judgment on sinners and about church discipline in Matthew's church, just as in ours. So Matthew may have added the interpretation to make the point even clearer—that we dare not take the place of God in this. We sometimes try to disguise our attitudes by claiming to "hate the sin but love the sinner." But is this really possible?

Reflection

"One of our great sins is wanting to take the place of God in judging who is, and is not, a worthy recipient of God's grace." Why, in your experience, is it part of the human condition to exclude?

- ^{139:1} O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
² **You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.**
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ **Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD,
you know it completely.**
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.**
- ⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ **If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
¹² **even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**
- ^{139:23} Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
²⁴ **See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.