THE FIRST, THE LAST, AND THE NO-COUNT SCOUNDREL

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Genesis 28:10–19a
Romans 8:12–25
Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

When I am asked to preach, I typically like to focus first on the lectionary reading from the Old Testament, because it is in the stories and characters bequeathed to us by our elder cousins in the faith that a realistic picture of God's ways with the world is sketched for us. Among the many things we learn from Israel's scriptures is that the notion that God redeems the world primarily through women and men who are blameless and upright, fear God and turn away from evil, is far from accurate. The Old Testament gives us a very different picture, one that is affirmed by the New Testament at the outset. The very first verse of Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus was the son of David and the son of Abraham, and then follows that bit of information with yet one more long and boring biblical genealogy, or it seems. But if we take the time to put some flesh and blood on the bare skeleton of that family tree, we discover that, as one astute observer puts it, there is a lot of flesh and blood involved.

Abraham, for example, who in the Bible is called the man of faith and the friend of God, twice lies about his wife to save his own hide, and then is evidently okay with cutting the throat of his only son. And David, well, he gains control of his kingdom through intrigue, seduction, and murder, arranging at one point for a loyal follower to be betrayed by his fellow soldiers so that he would be cut down by the enemy in order to hide his adultery. And don't even get me started about some of his offspring. I could go on, but suffice it to say that the line that leads to

Jesus was not a nice, polite, respectable family like the Cleavers or the Waltons or the Huxtables or the Brady Bunch or even the Pearsons from the television show *This is Us*. Jesus was descended from a family of adulterers, cheats, cowards, murderers, assassins, and liars; indeed, there is hardly a vice that this bent and twisted ancestral tree didn't have.

The point, I hope, is clear: Jesus belonged to us, that is, to all who make up the all-too-human family. He came to help us, but given what the human family has become, with all of our flaws, frailty and futility, it's not surprising that he met with such a bad end, and yet he has given us hope. If therefore we belong to Jesus by the spirit of adoption, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, we belong also to this family of his, and that means their stories become the essential foundation for our stories as members of the body of Christ. For a few minutes this morning let's look at one of the more disreputable members of our adopted clan—Jacob, a man who is in virtually every way a no-count scoundrel, who maneuvers every relationship to his advantage and regards every encounter as an opportunity to advance his own fortunes.

He exploits his brother Esau's hunger to convince him to give up his birthright in exchange for some red stew. (By custom the birthright belonged to the first-born, conferring privileged position within the family and a larger portion of the inheritance.)

Jacob later deceives his old, blind father Isaac by pretending to be Esau, with the help of his mother no less, in order to obtain the blessing that Isaac had intended to give to elder brother, ensuring that the formation of the chosen people of Israel would descend through him.

And if that weren't enough, Jacob cons his uncle, who would eventually become his father-in-law, of much of his wealth. Jacob does get a comeuppance of sorts when his uncle-turned father-in-law deceived him into marrying his older daughter Leah before allowing Jacob to wed his beloved Rachel, along with an extra seven years of free labor in the process, though there is

little indication that that incident cured him of his ways. He does learn toward the end of his life that what goes around comes around when ten of his sons deceive him, telling him that his beloved son Joseph was devoured by a wild animal, when in fact they had sold into slavery in Egypt.

In this morning's Old Testament reading, we find Jacob fleeing his brother's homicidal rage when he decides to bed down at a certain place for the night. Placing a stone under his head for a pillow, he drifts off to sleep and dreams that there was a ladder with its base set up on that particular spot of earth, its top reaching to heaven, and angels coming down and going up this ladder. And as if that vision is not awe-inspiring enough he hears the LORD, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, standing next to him, saying to him that the land on which he lay God would give to him and his offspring.

It is easy to focus attention on the phenomenon of Jacob's dream and overlooks its content. Now I've never had a dream, or any experience like that, and that's okay. Perhaps some of you have, and that's okay too. But whether we have or haven't had such an ecstatic experience isn't the point of the story. We need to exercise caution, because while such experiences can be fascinating, they can divert us from the main point of this story. Thomas Merton says of the early Desert Fathers that they did not seek to have extraordinary experiences, but struggled for purity of heart, that they might "forget themselves and apply themselves entirely to the love and service of God."

Listen again to what God says to Jacob in the dream: "[Y]our 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." What is amazing in this story, what we should take away from it, is not that Jacob had an awesome dream

in which God was present him, and it is certainly not that we should desire to have a similar experience of God's presence for ourselves.

Indeed, longing for extraordinary encounters with the divine would constitute the antithesis of this story. What is truly extraordinary in this narrative is that after reaffirming the promise made to his father and grandfather, God informs him that he would to be the next bearer of the most important mission that any human has been charged with. But many have wondered, how can it be that God revealed himself in a dream to a cheat and a con man, and then selected him to be the next in line to bear God's mission to redeem all of creation?

And yet, if we take to heart the witness of scripture, associating with the less-than-socially-acceptable is God's preferred way of dealing with us, his wayward human creatures, and never more so than when God joined our flesh to his mystery in a Jewish man who lived in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. What is most significant about the incarnation is not simply that the one who calls all things into being became human; it has to do rather with the humiliation, the rejection on the cross, of Emmanuel, "God with us," as a sinner and criminal. "He comes among us humans," Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "not in μορφή θεού (the form of God) but rather incognito, as a beggar among beggars, an outcast among outcasts." That Jesus never exploited his equality with God, but instead emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and being born in human likeness, refer not simply to his solidarity with humanity in general, "but with the most powerless and apparently distant from God."

The most noteworthy thing we hear in this episode from Jacob's story, then, is in God's assertion that in this rogue and in his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. Think about that for a moment: my and your relationship to God comes to us in and through someone we would be reluctant to have housesit for us while on vacation. Speaking now strictly

for myself, I need to be reminded from time to time that God regularly chooses the ne'er-do-well, the poor, the despised, the persecutor, the minion of a ruthless empire, to be instruments of grace. The fact that God vests the fate and future of all the families of the earth in the likes of Jacob unsettles our normal way of thinking. To borrow an image from this morning's gospel reading from Matthew, when left to my own devices I like to think that I'm obviously one of the stalks of grain and that others will be the tares awaiting judgment. I need to be regularly reminded that entertaining such notions are foolish.

One person who jogs my memory is the author Flannery O'Connor, who herself was far from the perfect saint, confessing to friends that her Christian convictions were constantly doing battle with her upbringing as a Southerner. In her short story "Revelation," she introduces us to Ruby Turpin, a woman who had always prided herself on being a respectable person, working hard every day, doing for the church, having a little of everything and "the God-given wit to use it right." Included in the list of her many virtues were her hogs, about which she proudly claimed "cleaner than some children." Ruby mostly considers the world as a fair and orderly place, where everyone occupies the position in the great hierarchy of life they are meant to occupy, and each could expect to receive what they had earned and thus were due.

One day Ruby was sitting in a doctor's waiting room, gospel music playing in the background. As she waited with her husband, Claud, who had an appointment to see the doctor, she considered the various classes of people in the room that were supposed to fit seamlessly into her well-ordered universe. She and Claud belonged to the home-and-land owners, near the top of the social heap. Below them on the pecking order were, first, the homeowners, then poor whites, and next to but not below them most African-Americans, "not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them." The only ones above them were the people with a lot of

money, bigger houses and much more land. Every now and then, however, a wrinkle would appear in Ruby's nice, neat, orderly world, "for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were [blacks] who owned their homes and land as well."

Among those she took notice of in the waiting room was Mary Grace, a "girl of eighteen or nineteen, scowling into a thick blue book which Ruby saw was entitled Human Development. The girl raised her head and directed her scowl at Ruby as if she did not like her looks." As Ruby made small talk with her mother the teenager's ire with her seemed to grow in intensity. At one point Mary Grace's mother exclaimed, "I think the worst thing in the world is an ungrateful person. To have everything and not appreciate it. I know a girl," she said, "who has parents who would give her anything, a little brother who loves her dearly, who is getting a good education, who wears the best clothes, but who can never say a kind word to anyone, who never smiles, who just criticizes and complains all day long." Ruby assured the woman that she was not like that: "When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got," Ruby replied "a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting 'Thank you, Jesus', for making everything the way it is."

With those words Mary Grace up and threw the book she had been reading at Ruby (the title of which, if you recall, was Human Development), striking her over her left eye, leaving her wounded and dazed. After the teenager is restrained, Ruby and Mary Grace stare at each other, Ruby convinced that the teenager knew her in some intense and personal way," beyond time and place and condition. "'What you got to say to me?'," she asked "hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation." Mary Grace raised her head, fixed her gaze on Ruby, and

whispered, "'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'." Ruby sank back in her chair, the young woman's words having struck her with the force of divine judgment.

The full effect of what had happened at the doctor's office only hit Ruby when she returned home. She felt as though she had been singled out for the message, though there was those in the room she was sure to whom it could more fittingly be applied. Turning over and over in her mind what Mary Grace had said to her, she went to her farm's pig pen to hose down her hogs, and in the process took out her anger on them. She finally turns her anger toward God, "'What do you send me a message like that for?', she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. 'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?'" Her argument with God grew in intensity until a "final surge of fury shook her and she roared, 'Who do you think you are'?"

As Ruby fell silent her question echoed over the pasture and across the road, and then "returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood." She raised her gaze and saw a purple streak like "a field of living fire" cutting through the sky, leaving her dumbstruck, and in its midst she saw what appeared to be "a vast horde of souls" climbing as if they had been directed to Jacob's ladder. As she contemplated the company of saints rumbling toward heaven on a bridge of light extending upward from the earth, Ruby was astonished to see that people like her were not leading the procession. Instead there were "white trash, clean for the first time in their lives," black folks in white robes, and many others shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."

She looked further, and saw her kind, the sort who believed that they were the first and the best of society, bringing up the rear, "marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone

were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away." For a time, Ruby did not move but kept her eyes fixed "on what lay ahead." She eventually turned to make her way up the darkening path to the house and as she did, the crickets struck up their chorus in the woods around her, "but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujahs."

What God disclosed to Ruby Turpin that evening was her indebtedness to the flesh, a painful lesson disclosed in and through the very people she counted as beneath herself. O'Connor's story came to mind as I thought about this week's scripture readings, and in particular Paul's statement that creation itself groans with labor pains. I suspect that these words have struck home for many of us in recent days in a way they never did before. Yes, in the past we had problems aplenty, but seldom did in cross our minds we couldn't eventually overcome them if we just used our brains and our technical prowess. Don't get me wrong, I hope like all of us that effective treatments and a vaccine can be developed to alleviate the suffering that the coronavirus has caused, but if that is the extent of our reflections I worry that we may just be missing what the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of the scoundrel Jacob might be trying to say to us.

In his sermon last week our pastor Eric Howell spoke about the fear, anxiety, and selfishness gripping so many in the midst of our present public health crisis, and though we are obligated to show compassion and empathy for those who are so troubled, to respond in these ways is to be indebted to the flesh, addicted to toxic emotions, attitudes, and dispositions that put the spiritual health of our souls and our relationships with others in peril. Eric then referenced Merton's exhortation to strive after the freedom, spontaneity, and love that comes to those who rest in God through contemplative prayer, and that's all to the good as well. Merton goes on to

say that contemplative prayer has “no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted” in the concrete realities of everyday life, in nature, in the body, in one’s work, one’s friends, one’s surroundings, and perhaps, in those with whom we have had little to do in the past. As we await with prayerful hope and patient longing for the revealing of the children of God, let’s take the opportunity afforded to us this peculiar “time-out” to our lives to put off the complacency, routines, and habits that formerly ordered our “normal” lives, so that the Spirit might refocus our eyes to see and attune our ears to hear what God may right now be disclosing to us in the beggar on the street corner, the immigrant in a detention center, the person of color struggling to keep her children safe, the ones who embrace what we are so sure are all the wrong moral and political positions, and maybe even no-count scoundrels such as Jacob. It was for such as these that Jesus endured the scandal of the cross, and then was raised by the Spirit to sit at the right hand of the Father. How did Jesus put it? The first shall be last and the last first.