

It's Never Too Late

Genesis 28:19-19a

Psalms 139:1-17, 23-24

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 17, 2011

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

It was the Greek Mathematician Archimedes who said, "Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world." He indicated that if only he had a fixed point on which to wedge his lever he could live through whatever might come and even effect great change. Our faith offers us such a firm and fixed point, and with such a lever, a place to effect change in a changing and uncertain world. Here in Jesus Christ is that which you can count on forever, that place to stand.

Such a place to stand is powerfully summarized in the fourth ordination question asked of all elders, deacons and ministers of word and sacrament. A question that brings together the first three questions which have to do with pledging loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to God as Triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to accepting of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word to us, and receiving of the essential tenants of our Reformed Faith as set forth in our Creeds and Confessions. This fourth question summarizes into one the heart of all these asking, "Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?"

It really is quite an ample place we have to stand as Christ's followers. By doing so, we essentially bind ourselves to certain higher truths and promise to live in obedience underneath these, and in so living are given perfect freedom. That is—we are free because we are bound. A great prayer of our Christian tradition concludes, "Help us so to serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom."

The journey from which I have recently returned to the Middle East and Europe; including Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Greece and Italy, provided an amazing sweep of experiences. I experienced such freedom, sacred space, and saw how this foundation emerged, from the Exodus out of Egypt, through the lands of Jesus' ministry in Jordan, Israel and Palestine, to the land where the Gospel spread among the philosophers in Greece to where the Gospel spread among the world's most powerful empire, Rome. Movement from slavery to freedom comes through faith in this mysterious yet revealed-in-time-and-place-and-history-God, who chose to make himself known and had a definite plan and purpose for his people and for all humanity. Even as he has for you and me today.

This trip came, thirty years after entering into ordained ministry, at a moment for me of transition and reflection about what God has over the horizon. I found myself pondering and reflecting a lot about this thing called life, how it passes so quickly and what we do on our way through it. I found myself coming back again and again to the first answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Man's (and woman's) chief end is to

glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” That is what we are here for, to glorify and enjoy God for a few years on earth and for all eternity in the life to come. Now, how do we work that out?

We work it out as we find and follow God’s providential will for our lives from day to day. Providence, the mysterious outworking of God’s sometimes crazy, sometimes awe-filled, sometimes heartbreaking, ultimately healing plan to use our lives for good. Our faith tells us that God really has a purpose and a plan for us. A purpose and a plan for creation itself. God is at work. But God’s way is mysterious.

I wish I could tell you just how all this works. You’d think that, after three years of a Lilly Grant to travel and explore how people, the world over, in various faiths, experience the Divine, I could lay it all out neatly for you. But alas, all I can do is tell you I believe with all my being that God does have a plan and a purpose for you, and for this world. And I can tell you that the more we are anchored and have a place to stand upon the solid rock of faith in Jesus Christ, the more we can soar and stretch and reach to unparalleled heights. We can be like a kite that gusts heavenward, twisting and turning and twirling high above because we are grounded, rooted, tethered to earth by that boy or girl who is holding the other end of the string. Untethered, unanchored, unrooted, the kite sails erratically then crashes and crumbles. Tethered it soars. We are most free when we are most bound to that which is True and Loving and Beautiful and Good. Jacob learns this.

Such freedom in being bound was no easy lesson for young wily conniving Jacob. This younger son of his father Isaac is on the run through the wilderness fleeing for his life from the wrath of his older brother Esau, whose birth right he has stolen. Jacob has been a liar and a cheater and a deceiver. Encouraged by his mother who loved him best, he had disguised himself as his brother Esau, prepared a meal for his blind old father Isaac, the sort of meal Esau was out in the field trying to hunt for and prepare. Jacob even tied animal skins on his arms to simulate the hairy arms of brother Esau since Jacob was smooth skinned. When Isaac questioned his identity, noting he felt like Esau but he sounded like Jacob, Jacob outright lied his way through. “I am Esau your firstborn.” Jacob kept it up long enough to get the irrevocable blessing. Now, after Esau returns, Jacob is on the run because his brother hates him for what he has done and seeks to kill him.

That night the fugitive lies down all alone in a wilderness place, heartbroken and fearful. He is free but certainly not bound. He has gained a birthright, and a blessing but lost a brother. As the sun sets poor, pitiful Jacob takes a stone for a pillow and lies down for the night. The stone is an apt metaphor for what his life has become. Hard, bitter, lonely, he finds himself between a rock and a hard place.

In despair and isolation he falls asleep and has an amazingly Technicolor dream. In it he sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Upon that ladder are God’s angels, those divine messengers who throughout Scripture appear at key times when God is about to act, or reveal a new level of truth.

Remember angels show up at important times in the New Testament too, like the announcement to Mary that she is to have a uniquely conceived Son, to the shepherds that this son who is Savior of the World has been born in Bethlehem, to the first witnesses at the empty tomb that He is not dead, he is risen as he said. Angels seem to show up at key turning points of God's ways with us. Angels show up in Jesus' parable ~ separating the weeds from the wheat. For Jacob it is his first inkling that God is active and alive, connecting, moving back and forth between heaven and earth and earth and heaven.

But that is not all. Beyond the sight of the angels comes the sound of a voice, a voice of the Holy One himself, standing beside Jacob and telling him one-on-one,

“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; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad.”

Then God speaks this promise to the lonely exile,

“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.”ⁱ

I

In his lonely night, Jacob suddenly discovers he is not alone. He is **ACCOMPANIED**. “I will be with you,” the Lord says. Has such an awareness ever come to you? Maybe at an especially low moment, you have been struggling with a problem at work, or maybe even now you are out of work, a relationship is worn raw, your health is precarious. Something is just not working out for you, something maybe you caused, something maybe that fell flat through none of your own doing. You are feeling sorry for yourself and very much alone. Yet somehow that small voice gets through to you and you recognize you are not alone in this. You recognize God is in this with you.

Such recognition, such awareness is one of the great gifts of the Christian community. Other fellow strugglers come along side you, willing to enter in and share your journey. People with whom you can open up to bit by bit some of the hurt you are feeling. People who cannot fix things for you, but people who can give you honest feedback and encouragement and affirmation. People who can be Jesus Christ for you. Luther called such folks, “Little Christs.”

When Jesus talks about the weeds and the wheat growing together until the divine harvest he gives us a word of hope. It is never too late. If God had yanked Jacob up before the bar of judgment that night in the wilderness and called him to an immediate

accounting, it is likely Jacob would have been found to be a weed. He is a pretty sorry mess of despicable humanity at that particular point.

Take a snapshot of the Church on any given Sunday, any given committee meeting, (excuse me - team) any given encounter, and you can find if you look hard enough some pretty ugly examples of the Church's failures-just a bunch of weeds. Jesus saw this often when he was with his disciples, listening to their bickering, their self-promotion for the best seat at the banquet table, their desire to have first chair violin.

Yet it is through such as these, Peter, James and John, and Jacob, that God chooses to work. Slowly, Jacob, the disciples, are presented with a bit and then another bit from the new curriculum of God's Kingdom. Some get it more quickly. Some more slowly. But the new reality of God's love and grace and forgiveness for you and me and Jacob unfolds.

John Calvin aptly describes this process of how a wise teacher dispenses the Gospel truth as students are able to receive.

“Christ is at once milk to babes and strong meat to those that are of full age. The same truth of the Gospel is administered to both, but so as to suit their capacity. Hence it is the part of a wise teacher to accommodate the capacity of those under instruction, so that in dealing with the weak and ignorant, he begins with first principles, and does not go higher than they are able to follow. He drops in his instructions little by little, lest it should run over, if poured in more abundantly.”ⁱⁱ

II

God tells Jacob, not only is he accompanying Jacob on his flight, but he is also **ACTING** on his behalf. “I will give you the land on which you lie, I will give to you and to your offspring, 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. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God is not done with Jacob. Mercifully the schemer, the conniver shall become the divine instrument for the preservation of God's people. Think of that as you ponder how God uses you, uses this church, South Highland Presbyterian, often in spite of ourselves, to spread his good word and work.

It is really remarkable how God takes our efforts, say to find the right staff partners, as we are now busily doing, calls together a particular search committee who prays and works and just the right person emerges. Or how just the right new class or study is undertaken for what God needs to teach us as a people at this time, that we might be part of God's blessing of the earth. God works in us and between us to keep us

together as a congregation and to use us as a congregation, blessed to be a blessing; in Birmingham, in Kenya, in Mexico, in India, at the Lovelady Center, in these classrooms all week long.

III

Then finally, God says not only will I **ACCOMPANY** you so that you shall never be alone, not only am I **ACTING** on your behalf, blessing you to be a blessing, but God also says Jacob will **RETURN**. God will bring Jacob back to the home from which he has fled. “I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”^{iv}

There are times we feel so far from God, and life seems so broken and hopeless to us that we feel like throwing in the towel. Yet God’s promises are true and trustworthy. God tells Jacob and God tells you, there is going to be a grand homecoming. You may be heading out to a foreign land today, but one day you will come full circle, home again. Isaiah puts it like this,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”^v

Suddenly for Jacob, there is an “ah ha” moment. He awakens from his dream. The lights comes on for him as he exclaims,

“Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

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 top of it. He called that place Beth-El, which means ‘House of God’.”^{vi}

Now Jacob discovers God’s presence no longer in a dream but wide awake. Wilderness suddenly is sanctuary. Desert is heaven’s gate. You look at life altogether differently, you participate in life altogether more fully, when you recognize God is here with you - **ACCOMPANYING YOU, ACTING THROUGH YOU, BRINGING YOU HOME.**

Elam Davies, a great Welch minister was for many years Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. He concluded his final sermon there with an illustration I love about a touching scene where a physically challenged young man was propped up

in the back seat of his parents' old beat-up sedan on a hill in Wales where as they held up the young man's limp head with their hands, he could see a matchlessly beautiful sunset. Davies reflected,

“I knew at that moment, at that very moment I knew that God can dazzle us with all the magnificence of his universe, but that in the secret of the universe is a love that comes to us in our frailty and our weakness and our need. It comes to us always asking our highest, but is never nearer to us than when we grope and sometimes grovel in the dust. I knew that the heart of the universe was revealing its glory, not in the sunset altogether, but in that compassion and grace and love which comes to us when we need it most and says there it is, there it is. And there, my boy, (my girl), you are and you matter... He's present in all (experiences) good or bad, right or wrong... to see us through, to enable us to be more than conquerors through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Look up, look up; to this God I commend to you, to this God, and I commend ourselves – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be all the praise and the glory, now and forever. Amen.”
vii

ⁱ Genesis 28:15

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, Day By Day with John Calvin, p.188, July 7, comments on 1 cor. 3:1-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 28:13-15a

^{iv} Genesis 28:15b

^v Isaiah 55:10-11

^{vi} Genesis 28:16-17

^{vii} Elan Davis, Sermons for the City, “The God in Whom We Can Be Confident”, preached may 6, 1984 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. P.38-39