

7th Sunday after Pentecost
“The Fugitive”
23 July 2017—Salado UMC
Preaching Text: Genesis 28:10-22

I have a friend who has an extreme interest in justice. One day he told a group of us about a bully at the park who appeared to be picking on younger children who were playing there. My friend said that a man sitting in a car at the park yelled at the bullying teenager to leave all the other kids alone. The teen then mocked the man, as a bully is likely to do at a distance from a formidable foe. Evidently, the man in the car had seen and heard enough from this bullying teenager, so he unfolded his 6’ 5” frame, got out of his car to meet the teen’s challenge. At this point the teen, who realized he was badly mismatched with the older, and much larger man, turned to run. Regrettably, for the teenage bully, he ran right into a volleyball post knocking himself senseless. “Justice was done then and there,” my friend said!

As we read about Jacob, we might wonder: “Where is the justice?” There is, however, we must admit, something unusual about Jacob. Jacob always lands on his feet. After his dream at Bethel, Jacob goes on to Haran. Laban, his uncle, tricks him instead of Laban being tricked by Jacob. Yet, at the end of his days at Laban’s house, Jacob swindles Laban and flees Haran only to face the wrath of his brother, Esau, whom he already deceived years before. Hear today’s lesson: Genesis 28:10-22.

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. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you (Genesis 28:10-22).

So, the wily Jacob, after gaining his short-sighted brother's birthright with a bowl of chili and purloined his aged father's blessing intended for the eldest son . . . now runs from his brother's wrath. Jacob's journey is a long one, perhaps 800 miles. Jacob begins his journey northward to Bethel, probably a 100 kilometer walk and spends the night at "a certain place" (Gen.28:11). Jacob uses a rock for a pillow and goes to sleep.

Soon, during a dream, Jacob perceives a *sullam* (traditional translation "ladder," but is often presumed to be a ziggurat). The bottom touches the earth, while the top reaches skyward. Angels and/or messengers of God ascend and descend on it . . . and God in the dream told Jacob:

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[c] 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.

It is the divine promise of land, people, and a blessing that God first offered Abraham, later to Isaac, and now to Jacob. Why would God offer this promise to this cheater and one who plays fast and loose with the truth? Why does God's promise to Jacob—on the run from a rightly enraged brother—seem so big and high minded? I wish I could answer these questions—but I cannot!

The problem most of us have with Jacob and his character, and all the seemingly unjust stories about our Bible's crooked characters is that we want others to get justice, while we desire mercy and forgiveness for ourselves. Yet, we worship a God of a different sort; one who desires to be merciful to those that this God chooses. This is

hard for most of us to abide. Yet, despite our discomfort, we hear Jesus' words recorded in Matthew's Gospel:

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:43-45).

What we want and what God gives us often vary. What I want and what God gives me often seem worlds apart.

*I want a God who will weed out the bad apples from the good; instead I get a God who says: **"Let both of them grow together until the harvest."**

*I want a God who will leave my well-enough alone and let me mold myself into what I want. Instead, I get a God who steadfastly refuses to leave me alone and says: **"I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."**

*I want a God who will punish those other sinners, but instead I get a Jesus who says: **"God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."**

Next time around I pray for a neat and efficient God. I will pray for a well-organized God who uses my kind of common sense. But for now, however, I will just have to abide the God who loves you and Jacob and even me, "Just I am, without a plea." Amen.

David Mosser, Salado UMC, Texas 76571