

“The Experience of God: Stone Pillows and Living with Weeds” by Jill Joseph

17 July 2011



The 5th Sunday After Pentecost

I've begun many of my sermons the last several months with a brief but wry comment regarding the difficulty of the week's Scripture for me. The difficulties are no more urgent for me this week, but I have decided to share with you at least briefly my heartfelt but frankly conflicted approach to the Bible and its centrality in our life before considering this week's readings.

At the broadest level, it is apparent that the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament provide texts that both give voice to, and invite, a deep and sustained involvement with God. They do so in diverse voices and many forms that include liturgical hymns, lamentations, narratives of a people's ancient history, letters, myths, discourses, prophecies, parables, and a recording of what was certainly an earlier oral tradition of the life of Jesus.

They also, for me, present consistent challenges that I would like to avoid, but cannot. It is always easy to point to selected verses from Paul's letters or that are attributed to him as examples of such difficulties. Even as our community explores the theme of "Learning to Live in the Body", I find myself taken aback by statements such as we read today: "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."

Today is even more challenging for me, as the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus taught there are "children of the evil one", who are an enemy "sowed by the devil" to be collected up and thrown into a furnace of fire at the end of the age where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Really?

My disquiet is neither trivial nor easily ignored. It arises not from some intellectual and liberal position about the world as it ought to be. Or perhaps, more honestly, it does not arise exclusively or even primarily from such intellectual roots. Rather, it arises from the experience of being Jill. In so far as I have been granted any glimpses of the God of my life, this is utterly inconsistent with such Scripture. I fully understand the subjectivity of my experience, its rootedness in historical circumstance and culture and personality. Nonetheless, the voice that I hear, the summons for which I give thanks, the heart of my life of faith and prayer and call, is a deep and unequivocal promise that I am loved beyond all measure, as I am called to love. That we are each loved.

But I am nonetheless concerned about my response to Scripture. There are those who have been part of this community for decades, some trained in theology, many with a deep familiarity with Scriptures. I take seriously your example of seriousness as you turn to Scripture. This does not, however, silence my disquiet.

In response to this disquiet, there are two extremes that I feel I must avoid. The first is to turn aside, dismissing our scriptural tradition as burdensome, potential irrelevant, and something I can easily avoid. There are many times I wish this were the case, but it is not. The other extreme seems to me to try to become something that I am not. It's easy to know that I'm not an evangelical Christian accepting the inerrancy of the Bible. It's less easy for me to know and accept the difficulties that I feel, and perhaps even to value these difficulties. After all, if I believe that I am loved, it is as the Jill who is.

If this is how I do not want to respond to Scripture, then how do I respond? Probably inadequately. But I am engaged.

First, as suggested a few moments ago, I've learned to value my own doubts. I have actually come to believe that at least for me, but perhaps also for you, doubt and darkness and silence can be sacred ground.

I've also tried to learn, whether by sharing with many of you in the School of Christian Living, or by reading scholars such as Marcus Borg. In so doing, I have found approaches to

Scripture that don't require me to be other than who and what I am.

Finally, I pick up Scripture as I can hold it close to me, although sometimes this is only as a sentence or a phrase or a word. I worry that this is an authentic and incomplete response, but it is what I can do and what sustains my life of faith.

With this as an introduction, I turn to today's readings and invite you to walk with me into what I find myself holding close as I reflect on experiences of God that I find there.

I begin with our Genesis story of the not altogether savory character of Jacob fleeing, under the guise of seeking a wife who is not a Canaanite woman, from a frankly awful situation largely of his own making. Under the guidance of his mother, he had practiced an elaborate deceit on his father, thereby stealing his blessing from his brother. Now he is undertaking a journey of something like 450 miles as a consequence of the not surprising rage and death threats against him.

One biblical scholar has commented, "If we were to summarize Jacob's life experience growing up with his family, we could say he was duped by his uncle, dominated by his mother, threatened by his brother, and rejected by his father." Perhaps as a consequence, he's not a terribly attractive character, and furthermore clearly not appreciably engaged

with God. Notably, in Genesis 27:20 while deceiving his father and pretending to be Esau, he refers to, “the Lord, your God”.

Now, with no servants accompanying him, and no dowry, he flees Beersheba in southern Canaan seeking to marry a first cousin in a distant land. But mainly he is running from the consequences of his own successful deceit, even this flight the result of further maternal manipulations as she suggested to his father that a local wife would be inappropriate.

In my life, and perhaps in yours, there is something of Jacob. I think we may trivialize this experience with clichéd words about “dysfunctional families”, but perhaps we need to honestly claim our pain, and confusion, and wounds that seem to heal far too slowly if at all. Most honestly of all, we might even name our complicity in these stories and see ways we re-transmit such hurts to others and the world about us.

Alone as darkness comes on, Jacob takes up “one of the stones of the place”, which some scholars suggest were ruins of the nearby city. It is on this stone where he lays his head as a pillow in that desert place. It seems there was no tent, little bedding, and I’m quite certain the stone was hard, unyielding, and very cold as the desert night came on fast.

But it was what he had.

And it was here that the dream, and the angels, and the voice of God came to him: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go”.

And I find myself reflecting on the stone pillows collected from the ruins of my life. The places I do not want to lay my head and the messages that come sudden and unbidden in that place.

Just a month ago in this sanctuary, I married my partner of 25 years and in so doing promised to love her in all the circumstances of our lives, both good and ill. To love her as she was, not as I would have her be. To love her strength and independence. Four days later, her mother died unexpectedly and I could not be with her as I needed to care for our grandchildren. In that loss and grief and in my reaction to it, I was given the opportunity, all too soon, to recollect those vows. To learn new, and perhaps unwelcome "Jacob things" about myself. But the promise was real and I have found surprising grace in our ability to embrace this difficult time and one another.

It is not only our God who promises to be with us and keep us wherever we go. We promise this to one another in myriad ways and circumstances. Marriage vows may be only the most public. We promise it here, at Seekers, in our Mission Groups, and our many commitments to the multiple wounded places in the world, to our work and our art, to our caretaking of the environment. And I would suggest that Scripture today says that this is all bound up together: confused and wounded beginnings, flight from unwelcome consequences, the stone pillows on which we lay our heads, and the voice of God.

Make no mistake: our voice can be, to and for one another, the voice of God. "Know that I am with you and will keep you

wherever you go”.

And the story continues as Jacob recognizes the wonder of this night, raising the stone as an altar, pouring over it oils, and then (in verses not read today) promising the Lord would be his God.....if only he were protected, and provided, and returned to his home. Ah ha: “if only....”.

I think I understand Jacob once again. Ever so subtly in my life of faith and prayer can emerge rigidity and demand, the distortion of mystery and dream and relationship into certainty and contract. It is not easy to walk away from the dream, learning what I can, and letting it remain a dream, however important. It is not easy to fully accept the mystery of God and the mystery of prayer.

Upon reflection, it seems to me that Jacob and I, and perhaps you, are more likely to experience our God in the unwelcome stone pillows collected from ruins where we lay our road weary heads than in the tidy altars we erect at which we lay our subtly conditional faith.

Our Gospel text from Matthew brings us to another context, the people of Israel no longer nomads and shepherds, but living in an agricultural society on the periphery of the Roman Empire, with their own highly elaborated and carefully parsed religious practices centered on the temple in Jerusalem. Under the pressures of brutality and compensation for complicity,

some collaborated with the imperial authorities, others were restive, many were probably largely indifferent in the face of the quotidian needs of their families and pressing poverty. Religiously, their world was highly structured with emphatic distinctions between what was holy and not, between what was clean and what was not, between those who could worship within the temple and those who could not.

In today's reading, Jesus is said to speak from a boat, providing the third of five discourses recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. I am certain that, as always, he spoke to peasants and outsiders, accompanied by a ragtag group of disciples often quarreling among themselves, frequently failing to understand, nonetheless be inspired, by his teachings. The parable of today is reported to have followed preceding quarrels with Pharisees and even with family and followers on that same day.

As I suggested at the beginning, I reach into this Scripture, the Parable of the Good Seed, and embrace warmly a phrase, an idea, perhaps the single word. I do so because, taken as a whole, it seems so alien to my glimpses of God.

But I take heart and my experience of God is vivified by elements of this story. Listen with me for just a while.

After planting seeds, the crop began to grow and produce grain, but weeds also grew.

When asked, "Where did they come from?" by his workers, the

farmer can only reply, "An enemy has done this!" I almost laugh out loud at this quick and all too familiar response.

Isn't this the easy answer I too often provide? It's got to be someone else's fault! It is really impossible that as I planted seeds, I also sowed weeds. It is really impossible that I prepared the soil inadequately. It has to be someone else's fault, this mixture of the wanted and the undesired, this confusion of the good and bad, this failure to achieve uniformly productive results for my efforts.

It seems to me that this is a "Jacob answer". That is, that an important effect of our unrecognized pain, and confusion, and wounds is that we toss responsibility elsewhere..... or perhaps, seemingly conversely, expect too much of ourselves. Is it really reasonable to suggest we have no hand in the confusion and failure? Is it ever really reasonable to suggest there be no failures, no weeds among the crops of our lives?

Doesn't the life of faith, faith that we are loved and forgiven, that we are saved for something wonderful, invite us to a deeper maturity? We may not like the weeds, but are they not just another plant in a place that we don't want them? Will they not always be there? And can we not get to work rooting them out if we are so inclined?

I am also profoundly heartened by the patience spoken of in this difficult parable. "Let them both, weed and crop, grow together until the harvest." Do I have such patience? Can I approach my life, my goals, my days, giving time to let things grow and, ever so often, sort themselves out? Is my experience

of daily meditation enough when, week after week, month after month, there is only the silence? When I wish I were a person of deeper faith than I am, can let it be? Can I, as Paul asks us to do, "wait with patience"?

I know to raise these questions is to take the Parable of the Good Seed in new directions, but these speak to my experience of God and deepen my ability to persevere, and even grow, in my life of faith. I share them with you, not because they are correct, but because they're Jill.

And in the end, it is all I have to offer. Just each of us can only offer what we are. Just as you can only offer what you are.

The wonder is, that in the heart of God, this is enough.

Psalm 139, which we did not read today, speaks of that certainty and I would like to conclude with my retelling of some of its words:

My God, you are as close to me as breath and bone, however deep the silence or dark the night.

I know your abiding love in every moment of my life

and there is no part of me that is apart from you.

*There is no word that I speak without your care,
nor a place that I stand where you are not.*

*There is little that I understand and words fail me totally.
But I know your abiding love in every moment of my life.*

*Where can I go that you are not? Where can I flee from your
enduring love?*

*Though I fly on the wings of the morning and roam across
the restless sea,*

you are there.

*Silence is filled with your presence
and darkest night with your love for me.*