

“No Escape”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
7th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11A) – 22 & 23 July 2017
Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23

He was running away. That’s how Jacob wound up on the road to Haran, hoping to take shelter with distant relatives there, hoping to escape the wrath of his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him. You see, Jacob had recently conspired with his mother, Rebekah, to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving him, the second-born, the blessing that rightfully belonged to the first-born son, Esau.

It was an elaborate ruse. To take just one example, Isaac’s vision was so bad that he couldn’t distinguish between his sons by sight. Esau was very hairy, so to trick his ailing father into believing that he, Jacob, was Esau, Jacob dressed in animal pelts, and it actually worked. Isaac passed the power of God’s blessing on to Jacob, leading Esau to a murderous rage, so Jacob fled.

After deceiving his father and cheating his brother, we might like to see Jacob suffer a little, and the fact that he used a rock for a pillow offers a clue that it was a rugged trip, but in his sleep, God came to Jacob in a dream. In that dream, God confirmed Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, promising the fulfillment of the covenant through him, and as a symbol of this binding truth, Jacob received a strange vision of a ladder stretching from Earth to heaven, with angels going up and down.

We wonder why God would favor such a lying, thieving, undeserving twerp with such a precious gift. It seems terribly unfair for God to sanction Jacob’s immoral actions, but our God is odd, choosing whom He pleases to serve as agents of His purposes, and that comes as good news to us, when we think about it.

Sometimes, because of what we've said or done or neglected to do, we feel unworthy of God's gifts, to the point where we deny or ignore and hide them, and the truth is, none of us are worthy. God's mercy alone makes us worthy, and such mercy can be more than we can bear, but if we choose to accept it, God's mercy helps humble us, gives us perspective on how things really are, and that humility leads to joy and freedom and peace.

Jacob awoke full of awe and wonder and fear, realizing that the dream was real, full of sacred meaning, so he exclaimed, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" After the dream, Jacob saw things differently. He was humbled and given greater insight into what was happening. So Jacob built a small pillar of stones with his pillow as the foundation, and poured oil over it, a sign of sacrifice and thanksgiving.

To get the rest of story, go home and read Genesis, but just in case you get busy or forget, Jacob makes it to Haran, falls in love, gets tricked by his father-in-law into marrying a different daughter. Then Jacob works for seven more years, for a total of fourteen years, before he finally marries his sweetheart. He prospers by tricking his father-in-law, and eventually returns home and reconciles with Esau. Sorry for the spoilers, but I hope the outline entices you. The most fascinating, plot-twisting TV dramas have nothing on the Bible.

And we are part of that drama, part of the never-ending story that God is writing through each of us day by day, if we let Him. Of course, we look at people like Jacob and Esau and Isaac and Rebekah and feel a little dull compared to the wild excitement of their lives. We can feel puny compared to these titans of the faith, and we rightly revere them, despite their sometimes severe character flaws. But because of both their flaws and their faith, we can identify with them. We are more alike than different.

For example, from time to time, all of us run away to escape something dreadful. Some of us have done this literally to escape danger, like an abusive relationship, but in the figurative sense, all of us, without exception, run away from what threatens and frightens us, and often what scares us most is our odd God – unpredictable, a sovereign entity who doesn't always play by our rules; a God who calls us to do risky things that will probably disrupt our lives and possibly get us into trouble.

A long while ago, a college freshmen tried to run away from God. There were certain inner stirrings he preferred to ignore, because they were inconvenient, an interference with his plans to become a lawyer, something he wanted to do for all the wrong reasons. So God started sending him dreams. Nothing nearly as glamorous as Jacob's, but enough to catch someone's attention and keep them up at night for hours, disturbed and confused.

God then capitalized on the sleep-deprivation, working during the day to penetrate the fortress gates that guarded this young man's heart and mind. It wasn't a voice. It was a sense that something was wrong, the sort of feeling you get when you know you've forgotten something really important, but can't for the life of you remember what it is. It was relentless and annoying, and finally this freshman told God something along the lines of, "If you leave me alone, I'll look into it," and the dreams and the short nights stopped, and he could focus again on the things that were important to him.

Of course, this was a ploy, a trick. He signed up for a seminar in religion with every intention of manipulating the process, of piling up evidence – like an aspiring lawyer would – that could disprove what God seemed to want, so that he could be free to pursue his own agenda, but in that class, God worked through a wise professor and a few classmates who gently – and sometimes, not so gently – challenged this young man to be more open-minded and courageous.

Long story short, his attempt at escape failed, and in addition to gaining greater insight into what God wanted, the greatest lesson he learned was that you cannot run away from God, no matter how hard you try. Or as a friend told him at the time, “Jesus will hunt your butt down.”

Eventually, God catches up, and we can fight Him or ignore Him or try to trick Him, but we just end up fighting or ignoring or tricking ourselves, because our true identity, our real life purpose, comes from a single source, God. And while that reality can be intimidating, it also brings immense comfort and confidence.

Psalm 139 sings of this truth about God in words reminiscent of a 1983 rock hit by The Police.

Every breath you take
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you

Every single day
Every word you say
Every game you play
Every night you stay
I'll be watching you

Oh can't you see
You belong to me
My poor heart aches
With every step you take

God notices everything we think, do, or say, which can feel a little creepy and make us overly self-conscious, but that's not the point. The point is that God is always with us, whether we want Him to be or not. He won't let us go, and no matter how hard we run, once we collapse from exhaustion, God will be there waiting for us. To quote the Psalmist, “Where can I go then

from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.” [Psalm 139:6-7]

Whoever wrote this Psalm was having a really good day in the life of faith. Instead of trying to run away, the author celebrates God’s presence, excited and overjoyed that there is literally no place he can go without God being right there with him. He’s humbled by it, writing, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain to it.” [Psalm 139:5] The Psalmist urges God, “Search me out, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my restless thoughts.” [Psalm 139:22] That’s a brave invitation that purifies, clarifies, and offers relief.

Now whoever wrote this Psalm was a sinner just like me and you and Jacob, and there must have been days when he couldn’t sing it, when it seemed like nonsense, a piece of garbage. But on his better days, when God’s grace and mercy were allowed to come through, that empty feeling we get from loneliness would have been transformed into a sense of wholesome solitude. The sense that no one cares would have been ameliorated because he would have known that God always cares, more than any other possibly could. On those days, this ancient songwriter would have been at peace, free from worry, running toward God instead of away from Him, and we can enjoy those days, too. Amen.