

# SERMON

# STARTERS

Marva Jean Hutchens

July 17, 2005

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12,  
23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew  
13:24-30, 36-43

## Bask in God's Presence

Psalm 139 is soul food for me. There is no place where we are beyond God's reach and care. We cannot flee from God, nor will God abandon us. In the song "I Was There to Hear Your Boring Cry," John Ylvisaker captures the image of God's presence with us in every chapter of our lives from birth to death.

Whenever I travel to new places, the images of Psalm 139 accompany me. Different surroundings provide opportunities to bask in God's presence, whether it be watching the ocean waves, or viewing the first sight of a mountain range followed by the panoramic view from the mountain peak, or navigating through Rio de Janeiro seeing the statue of Christ the Redeemer from every angle, or just watching the stars on a clear summer night. Vacations invite us to see God in new settings.

For United Methodist pastors, this time of year is the beginning of a new appointment year. Whether we are nervous about a new appointment, filled with excitement about a continuing appointment, or struggling to keep from being stagnant in our ministry, we can find strength in remembering that we and all those we serve are not beyond God's reach and care.

July 24, 2005

Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11,  
45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew  
13:31-33, 44-52

## God Intercedes for Us

Last week the psalmist boldly declared that God stands with us wherever we are. This week Paul takes it a step further stating that in those moments when we feel most vulnerable, God intercedes. God

stands not only with us but also between us and that which might otherwise overwhelm us.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Early in my ministry I was serving as a volunteer chaplain at a suburban hospital when I met a man whose wife had just been brought into the emergency room and was not expected to live. He was quite distraught and urgently asked me to move with him to the back corner of the family waiting room to pray for his wife. As we moved to the corner, my silent fervent prayer was to find the words that would bring comfort to this man. As I held his hand in mine, he began to speak the words of prayer as if the very Spirit interceded. When he finished praying, he graciously thanked me for praying with him.

When we allow God to intercede, we become partners with God rather than performers for God. As partners we can begin to observe that in all things God works for good.

July 31, 2005

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15;  
Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

## Wrestling with the Past

Jacob is a case study in the pain of broken relationships. He is at odds with his brother, with God, and with himself. In this passage we meet a worried Jacob.

Earlier in the story he fled from home after stealing the blessing that had been rightly reserved for his brother Esau. Now, twenty years later, he is returning home with wives, children, and servants. Outwardly he appears to be a prosperous man, but inwardly he is troubled.

Jacob's past was catching up with him. All his life he had been a grabber and a fighter, and he had not fought fairly. Now his past, his conscience, and his fears were battling within. Some have referred to this as Jacob's "dark night of the soul."

God responded by blessing and renaming Jacob. Like Abraham and Isaac before

him, Jacob finally realized that he must trust in God rather than his own strength and wit. The experience profoundly changed him. In fact, his new name, Israel, meaning "one who struggles with God," represented a new identity, one which came to represent not only him but also the people who came after him.

The good news for us is that we also can come to terms with our past in order to have peace in the present and hope for the future.

August 7, 2005

Genesis 37:1-4,12-28; Psalm 105:1-6,  
16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15;  
Matthew 14:22-33

## From Solitude to Service

Last week's story of the feeding of the five thousand began with "when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there." This week's reading also begins with Jesus going off to pray. Jesus overcame physical hunger by multiplying the loaves and fish; now he overcomes the forces of nature by mastering the sea.

John Indermark notes in his book *Traveling the Prayer Paths of Jesus* that Jesus would withdraw into a quiet place for prayer, not because teaching, healing, preaching, and feeding were unimportant, but because Jesus' prayers in solitude created the context from which his activist ministry proceeded. Jesus needed time to pray, so he sent the disciples on ahead across the Sea of Galilee.

In Jewish tradition water was a symbol of chaos. The disciples found themselves in the midst of a dark and scary chaos. It did not look good—such a great storm and such a fragile boat. In the latest, darkest part of the night, Jesus came walking on the sea to their aid. The miracle was the power of God that broke forth in Jesus, a power greater than the storm and chaos.

This continues to be a powerful story. The church has often been compared to a boat, tossed to and fro in a stormy world. For us today we know that storms will

surely come in the form of conflict, sibling rivalry, opposition, and slow progress in our Christian walk and our work as a church. We will do well to follow the path of Jesus to reflect in solitude in order to create the context for our response to the storms of life.

August 14, 2005

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133;  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew  
15:(10-20), 21-28

## Seeking Reconciliation

A theme throughout this week's readings is the tension between rejection and reconciliation, and the utter joy when unity is achieved. How wonderful it is when Jacob's sons are reconciled, when Joseph opts for reunion instead of vengeance. Paul stresses the unity of Gentiles and Jews as God includes them in the gift of mercy. Matthew tells of the saving power of God that brings reconciliation to those who once were divided as he tells about a Canaanite woman who finds healing for her child from a Jewish rabbi.

A question that comes to mind is who is responsible for seeking reconciliation—the offender or the person who was wronged? We wonder how Joseph—the dreamer, the favored son, the despised brother, the imprisoned slave, the person of great power and prestige in Egypt—could be so gracious? Was it his good fortune, or did God replace bitterness with benevolence in his heart?

If we find ourselves as the one who was wronged, we may truly believe we have a right to be angry. However, if we harbor that anger long enough, we will find ourselves being held hostage by our bitterness.

God's desire for us to live in unity allows for either party to initiate reconciliation. Our prayer is for God to replace bitterness with benevolence so that all may know the joy of community as children of God.

August 21, 2005

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124;  
Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

## Risk Your Gift

Paul urges his followers to claim their gifts from God and then present those gifts to God and one another as a "living sacri-

ifice." He also warned not to be "conformed to the world but [to] be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."

Sometimes we have difficulty carrying this out because we don't think we have any special gifts to claim. I still feel a twinge of sadness as I remember the day my grandpa lamented, "I'm just an old farmer," because in my eyes he was a great and generous man.

Shiphrah and Puah were "just midwives" according to Egyptian cultural standards. However, in a courageous act of civil disobedience, they refused Pharaoh's order to kill infant Hebrew boys at birth.

Our challenge today is to claim our gifts and then to risk using them in ways that make a difference in the world. That may include being countercultural. We may never see our name in ink in the history books, but our task is to be faithful.

August 28, 2005

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26,  
45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew  
16:21-28

## Spirit-Led Discipleship

Last September when newly elected Bishop Sally Dyck arrived in Minnesota, she invited all clergy to read Romans 12 every day until further notice. Then on Ash Wednesday she preached to a group of gathered clergy using this text and started writing weekly devotionals on the text to be posted on the Minnesota Conference Web site. And now this week we encounter the text again in the lectionary. For her, this description of Spirit-led discipleship is not just a vision du jour, it's a call to faith in action. "Let love be genuine; . . . hold fast to what is good; . . . Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer."

These are not peripheral matters. Exercising love, rejoicing in hope, overcoming evil with good, learning to meet persecution with prayer rather than retaliation—all go to the heart of what it means to be led by the Spirit and to live by grace.

One of the advantages of reading Paul's Ten Rules for Christian Life regularly is that at different times in our own journeys, different ones seem to stand out as insightful. It is noteworthy that he begins and ends by an urging to the "good." Just as Genesis begins with the litany of cre-

ation deemed good, Paul now asserts that "good" defines the church's calling in witness. That Spirit-led discipleship turns some conventional wisdom upside down is "good." It truly is a call to faith in action for our congregations today.

September 4, 2005

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans  
13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

## New Beginnings

On this Labor Day weekend we are culturally preparing for new beginnings, while in the church year we are continuing in the season of Pentecost and reflection of the life of the church. However, Matthew records instructions from Jesus on how to "start over" if the gathered community is being disrupted by an unrepentant member. The pattern that he describes was intended for Matthew's community, but it also proves to be quite helpful for us in our congregations, classrooms, workplaces, or neighborhoods.

Step one is for the injured party to initiate a conversation. The offer of grace and forgiveness must come from the one who was wronged. Some children have been taught the "bug and a wish method"—that is, "It bugs me when you [identify the irritation], and I wish you would [take the appropriate steps to resolve it]."

If that doesn't resolve the issue, step two is to take a couple of witnesses along and repeat the conversation. Both parties deserve a fair hearing. This reflects a long-standing Jewish practice of reconciliation in the synagogue.

If the issue is still not resolved, then take the issue to the entire congregation or community involved. The community as a whole is concerned with the ethical behavior of the individual. The integrity of all parties is at stake. With God's help, new beginnings emerge when conflict is resolved.



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July 10, 2005

## 8th Sunday of Pentecost

Gen. 25:19-34; Ps. 11:105-112; Rom.  
8:1-11; Matt. 13:1-9;18-33

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### What Will You Leave Behind?

Romans 8 is among the most majestic, mysterious and memorable of biblical passages. The preacher might preach a series of three messages from this chapter (lections on July 10, 17, and 24). Two sessions between these Sundays for more in depth study might also be rewarding, to teacher and student alike!

The connecting link between the despair of chapter seven (“Wretched man that I am”) and the good news of chapter eight is the word “Therefore.” There is a shift in tone, an announcement that there is now “no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (compare with John 3:17).

The contrasts are sharply stated: we could not keep the old law, Jesus completes the new covenant. Flesh (sin, rebellion, but not our physical bodies) is at war with spirit. The indwelling Christ leads us into the presence of God, who offers resurrection life. “To set our minds on the Spirit,” Paul writes, “is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). The sermon can focus on the death of the old life and the entrance into an existence free of condemnation. The power of God over human sin is pure grace—God does what we cannot do. This may not be the end of the Christian life—there is growth in grace—but it is a beginning. The preacher can open the door that leaves Romans 7 behind, inviting the listeners to life and peace through the power of the indwelling Christ.

Kenneth H. Carter Jr.