

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. E. Gary Taylor

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, Amen.

Of all the remarkable stories in scripture, few show a greater character arc than Jacob's, which unfolds across 25 chapters of Genesis. From the moment he is born, clutching his twin brother's heel, through his schemes against his brother and father, his marriage to two sisters because of his father-in-law's deception, his nighttime wrestling with an angel at the fort of Jabbok that leaves him wounded for life, and finally his death under the care of Joseph, the vizier of Egypt, Jacob, the trickster who becomes the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, may be the person in scripture who grows and changes more than any other.

Jacob is not only one of my favorite characters in the Bible, he may be the one I relate to personally more than any other. Maybe you can too. On this morning when we celebrate the baptism of these beautiful children and the start of their lives journey, my sermon today is going to be somewhat more personal than usual because of the power these two readings, Jacob's Ladder and the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, have exerted on me through my own character arc.

My hope is that they'll resonate with you too. Jacob, you'll remember, is the one who cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright with a bowl of red stew. He also tricked his blind father Isaac into giving him the fatherly blessing meant for Esau by wearing a costume of fur to pass for his hairy brother.

Esau, his much stronger, tougher, older brother, is looking for vengeance and so Jacob flees, which we know was necessary for the rest of Jacob's extraordinary life that follows. But when we reach the point in the story from which our reading is taken, Jacob is on the lamb in the desert, running from his past, scared, and utterly alone in the world. One can only imagine he's asking himself, what have I gotten

myself into? In the year 2009, I was a middle-aged man who had walked away from a promising 20-year career as a prep school administrator in Connecticut, well on my way to my then goal of becoming a head of school.

Instead, I had uprooted my wife and ripped my children away from the only home they'd ever known to move way down south to northern Virginia to attend seminary. No one was paying me to go to seminary. No one promised me a job after I was done.

I thought I had heard the call to priesthood and had a very encouraging rector and discernment committee from my home parish who supported my decision to go. But after a few months there, I was beginning to feel like I had made a terrible mistake. The clear purpose of our seminary, all but printed on our textbooks, was to train me to become a rector.

But I did not want to be a rector. My world was children, schools, camps, playgroups. My gifts were teaching and organizing.

I was pretty sure I was called to be a school chaplain, but no one in my seminary really even knew what that was. It's hard to put into words my crisis of vocation. I had moved my family for this? What had I gotten myself into? Well, let's leave Jacob and me lying there with our doubts and insecurities and turn for a moment to our gospel reading for today, the parable of the wheat and tares.

I wonder if this one is familiar to you. With its ominous threats of the furnace of fire and the weeping and gnashing of teeth, it's not nearly as beloved, say, as the parable of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son. Plus, this parable sometimes gets confused with the classic parable of the sower we heard last week with seeds falling on the path or among the thorns, not only because of the shared seed metaphor, but because these two are the only parables that Jesus explains to his disciples.

For the most part, Jesus lets his parables just stand on their own without going into exactly what each is trying to say. Frankly, this is part of the power of parables. There is no one correct interpretation of these extended metaphors.

Each story has its own power to say what we need to hear most at the time if we wrestle with them prayerfully and with an open heart. Now, given Jesus's explanation, I'd always thought this parable was pretty cut and dried. The master sows some wheat in the field, but later the enemy comes and secretly sows weeds or tares.

Over time, the wheat and tares begin to sprout, and the master's servants come to him in dismay. Something terrible has happened. What must we do? There are weeds among the wheat.

Shall we pull up the weeds? And the master replies, no, let them grow together. For in pulling the weeds, you might pull up some wheat. At harvest time, my reapers will harvest it.

Jesus goes on to identify the sower as the son of man, the field as the world, the good seed as the children of the kingdom, the weeds as the children of the evil one, the enemy who sowed them as the devil, and the reapers as the angels. Be a good seed or suffer the consequences, this parable seems to say. The whole story tied up in a neat little package, no ambiguity, every detail accounted for, except one.

Did you notice it? What about the servants? The ones who go to the master crying, something terrible has happened. What must we do? Who are they? What does a parable tell us about them? These are the well-meaning people who see that all is not well, and they're worried. Like those of us gathered here today, we fret that so many of the world's problems, so many of our own problems, are bigger than we can tackle on our own.

The master's servants are the ones feeling like the weight of the world is resting on their shoulders, and they don't know like we don't know how we can save it. But the master says, that's not our role. Let them grow together, God says.

My reapers will harvest it all. We are to tend our field as best we can, and not judge others or ourselves, not worry about what we cannot control. That's what I take from today's parable.

We are to do God's work, but not God's job. He's got this, and we've got him. We are but God's servants who do, are to do, the best we can, and then release our anxiety to him, because we're in his hands, always.

Now to be clear, I was not clever or insightful enough to figure this out on my own. This was the loving counsel given to me by my spiritual director in seminary when I shared my vocationarily insecurities with her. And I so desperately wanted to be the servant God wanted me to be, but the messages coming at me were confusing.

Maybe you find or once found yourself in the same predicament. We can get so caught up in what am I to do, that we forget the profound truth that Jacob had to be reminded of in his hour of need. Let's return to Jacob.

Lying in the wilderness, filled with fear and doubt, utterly alone, somehow amid all the tossing and turning, with a rock for his pillow, Jacob falls asleep. And in his sleep, he has a dream. He dreamed 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.

How very strange. Now the Hebrew word translated here as ladder might be more accurately translated as ramp. I like that image even better, and imagine a giant handicapped access ramp with angels of all shapes and colors and sizes going up and down on it.

Some walking purposefully, others awkwardly, maybe even a few in wheelchairs passing up and down between heaven and earth, connecting the here and now with the divine and the eternal. Every moment, every place, every person. Know that I am with you, God says, and I will keep you wherever you go.

Sadly, Jacob doesn't totally get it. After all, his arc is long and he has a long way yet to go. Surely God's in this place, he exclaims upon awakening.

This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven. And so he jumps up and builds a pillar there, calling it Bethel, the house of God. Like so many, Jacob confuses the presence of God with a geographical location, limiting God because of Jacob's own limited perspective to a lonely spot in the desert where Jacob was just lucky enough to have spent the night on his way.

But we know better. We hear God's promise even if Jacob misses it, I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go. We have Jesus's assurance that he will be with us under the end of the age.

We have Paul's glorious words from Romans today ringing in our ears, those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. You have received a spirit of adoption.

We are children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. This is the message of baptism.

Of course, we are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. Nothing can prevent God from loving us, from walking with us through the changes and chances of our life's journey. The ramp to heaven is always with us.

In 2009, I did not get a vision of a holy wheelchair ramp or heavenly voices other than that of my spiritual director and my wonderful wife, who lovingly walked beside me and followed this uncertain vocational path with me, and who never doubted that we were where God wanted us to be. But what I did get, right when I needed it, was not one but two phone calls out of the blue from recruiters who wanted to confirm that I was both studying to be a priest and had decades of school leadership experience. Because, they said, that is a rare commodity in some significant demand these days.

That was the message of support I needed to assure me that I was on the right path with God active in my life. I knew God was assuring me I was pursuing my true vocation, one that led me, less than a decade later, to Trinity School and Trinity Church, the best job I could ever have dreamed of. And I didn't even need a rock for a pillow.

Know that I am with you, God says, and I will keep you wherever you go. If we can leave behind our fears, our worries, our doubts, and trust that God loves us, that God is with us, even in our darkest nights, we can begin to tap into unimaginable strength to face with confidence and joy whatever might come next with God by our side, no matter what, no matter where.

Amen.