

***What Kind of World Is This?"***

Psalm 139 *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

Genesis 28:10-19a *Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"*

Matthew 13:24-30 *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.'*

It's always risky to project into biblical characters things that aren't given us in the stories themselves. But I can't resist this one! The story of Jacob and his family is told so simply and skillfully that it engages our imaginations at every turn.

We don't know exactly how old Jacob was when he left his parents to find a wife back in Haran, the home of his grandfather Abraham. He was probably a young man, maybe in that twenty-something time of confusion, too old to be considered a child any longer, too young to have the wisdom that only comes with life experiences that teach us that very wisdom. We forget sometimes how challenging these years are for young adults!

Surely Jacob's life was burdened as he shuffled toward Haran, kicking stones with his sandaled feet, thinking about everything that was going on in his life. Things were not good at home. His mother Rebekah kept tension in the family by her favoritism of Jacob over Esau. She encouraged Jacob in his competitiveness and tricksterism in order to get his way. Esau, the oldest brother, was entitled to the family blessing, but Rebekah and Jacob conspired to trick him out of it. You get the feeling that Esau was not the sharpest arrow in the quiver and your heart goes out to him, victimized by his mother and brother. When Esau overhears his father telling Jacob to go find a wife from their own people and not from the Canaanites, he figures he'll do the same and maybe earn some affection and approval from his father. This is a sad picture of a young adult child trying desperately to gain parental acceptance. Then there is Isaac, the old father who is nearly blind, allowing himself to be played by his wife and son. It takes two to tango, and Rebekah's manipulations needed Isaac's passivity. He's somewhat of a checked-out husband and dad.

So here is Jacob, the victim of his own character flaws and his mother's manipulative scheming. His brother hates him enough to kill him. His father is distant from it all. Jacob is not sure what all this blessing stuff is about anyway, but I'm guessing he feels far from being blessed. Now he is on a journey to find a wife his mother wants him to have. It bears noting that he is instructed to marry one of his cousins. For those who think the Bible gives us a blueprint about marriage, this is only one of many places that remind us that we can't use the Bible in that way. Jacob is part of a confusing, troubled, and we might say dysfunctional family. He is probably at a loss to know his own purpose in life or even the purpose of life itself. This may have been something of Jacob's state of spirit when he stopped late in the evening to sleep out under the stars.

Jacob pulls up a stone for a pillow, falls asleep and dreams. He dreams of a ramp—not a ladder, which is not a good translation. It is a wide ramp that connects heaven and earth. The heavenly beings, or angels, are going up and down the ramp. They are coming and going, fulfilling the divine commands in order to govern things on earth (Gerhard Von Rad). Dreams in the Hebrew scriptures were understood to be a way that God communicated with people, revealing the truth of things. So Jacob in his dream has stumbled upon central control, the main connection between heaven and earth.

In the dream God says to Jacob that he will be blessed and a blessing to nations, that his offspring will multiply throughout the world, and that God will be with him and keep him

wherever he goes. This is a restatement of the original promise given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. In all this mess of Jacob's life, the promise is still there. When surely a question in his heart was, What kind of life IS this? What kind of world IS this?—the promise is still there. In all of that confusion and lostness and doubt about himself and life, all of a sudden reality opens up to him. He sees what it is really about, that there is this direct and real connection between heaven and earth, that God is always caring for the world, and that God is always with the world that God made. In spite of how things look at any given time, in spite of how badly human beings behave toward each other and the world, in spite of everything in our lives that troubles and perplexes and causes us pain, God is with us. God is still calling us and blessing us to be channels of God's purposes. The world IS God's and everything in it.

From time to time, as we struggle along with this business of faith and faithfulness, we will discover and rediscover the connectedness of heaven and earth, the sacred dimension of life, that God is everywhere that we can be. The ancient Celtic Christians spoke of "thin places" in the world, places where the sacred connectedness of the world was especially clear and strong. Native American people have always known this sacred connectedness, this divine dimension of the world. Biblical spirituality is also creational spirituality. It bears witness to the presence of God in and through creation, a presence that may be obscured by circumstances but is nonetheless eternal, steadfast, and life giving. That we are sometimes so filled with discouragement or confusion or doubt that we aren't aware of that sacred dimension does not mean it is not there.

What kind of world IS this? The question arises in Jesus' parable. The realm or kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out to sow seeds in his field. These were good seeds. Then someone sneaked in and sowed bad seed, weeds. The servants rush in to the owner in confusion. What happened? Weren't your seeds good? How did those weeds get there? The owner just says that an enemy did it, no more explanation than that. Well, should we run out there and tear up all the weeds? No, says the owner. If you do that, you'll pull up the wheat along with the weeds. The particular weed here was called *darnel*. It was hard to distinguish from wheat and its roots intertwined with the roots of the wheat so that if you pulled up the *darnel* the wheat came with it. No, just let it all grow and at harvest we'll cut it all down and separate it out, the wheat from the weeds.

What kind of world IS this? Didn't you sow good seeds, God? Isn't your world good? Then how did these weeds get here? What's up with this evil stuff going on in and around us? Jesus doesn't get into philosophical discussions. He just says that the seed that God sows, that the seed of the Gospel, is good seed. We can trust it and we can trust the "owner," that is, God. The existence of bad things, the resistance to the Gospel of God's love in Christ and God's kingdom of justice and peace is real. Jesus doesn't try to explain it and he definitely says that we shouldn't get hung up on it. Our job is to stay focused on the wheat, the good seed, the Gospel, the kingdom of God.

There is a warning in this parable. Jesus cautions the disciples and us against thinking we know how to go after evil and take it out. Jesus is warning about our tendencies to decide who is "in" and who is "out," who is "good" and who is "bad," who is a "real" Christian and who is not. These may well be our concerns but it is dangerous when we decide to go after what or who we consider wrong or bad. Jesus does not want zealots in his cause, who end up doing even more damage.

About a week ago someone got into Saint John's Reformed U.C.C. in Staunton and started a fire in the sanctuary, leaving graffiti related to the U.C.C. Synod's resolution of equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian persons. That's going after the weeds and pulling up the wheat. We become so convinced of our own rightness that we hurt others in the process of our zealous campaigns. On a bigger scale, our nation becomes so convinced of its own moral rightness that we invade Iraq, murdering tens of thousands of civilians—men, women, children—dazzled by our own capacity to inflict "shock and awe." These are not the ways of Jesus, not the ways of God.

Does this mean that we don't address the wrongs and evils in the world? Not at all. But it does mean that we do so in the truth, the spirit and the ways of the one we claim to follow, Jesus Christ. Jesus is concerned that our lives be wheat-centered, not weed-centered. Being weed-centered means becoming obsessed by all that is wrong and negative so that we only increase anger, hurt, and lack of awareness. Being wheat-centered means living our lives out of the very Gospel that we proclaim—the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ that calls us to our true humanity, the goodness with which God made us.

When Jesus speaks of the final harvest, the separating of the weeds and wheat, he is saying that the ultimate outcome of things is in God's hands. That outcome is already determined. We don't have to fight that battle and if we do, we are contributing to the violence, the evil. Ours is to let the growth happen, to trust that the good seed is good, that the field is God's, and to keep on being and sowing good seed. The weeds, as numerous and poisonous as they may seem, do not have a future, though at times it may not seem that way to us.

We, like Jacob, are on a spiritual journey. It is the journey of hearing God's promise of new life for us and the world and trusting in God's leading and presence along the way. There are moments when life seems so confused and full of struggles that we wonder if this really IS God's world and if God is still with us. Like the servants in the parable, as we follow Jesus Christ in discipleship, there are times we wonder if the seed is good and why there seems to be so much in life that is destructive and contrary to God's dominion of love. We wonder if what we are doing really does any good, if it matters at all that we are trying to live as God's good seed and to sow the good seeds of God's love in the things we do, the ministries we work with.

This is why our faithfulness in the inward journey is so important. When we order our lives around prayer, inner listening, quieting ourselves, and becoming attentive to God's presence and spirit, then we are more able on a consistent basis to experience those "thin places," those moments when we perceive the connection between heaven and earth. Then we become aware, as did Jacob, that, Surely, God is in this place and I did not know it! We know that this is indeed God's world, that God is still present and speaking, that life has an unshakably sacred dimension. And we hear from Jesus the comforting and hope-giving word that evil and violence, all those things around us and in us that work against life, do not have a future. The seed of the Gospel is good seed and our faithfulness, as feeble as it may seem to us, is contributing to the harvest. It is a harvest that we may not see in our own lifetimes, of which we may experience only a foretaste, but it is growing to fullness nonetheless. Our joy is that we are called to be a part of the process.