

July 17, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

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.'

We don't really know Jacob's age or state of mind when he left home to find a wife in Haran, where his grandfather Abraham came from . He was probably twenty-something, that time mixed with excitement, confusion, and fear, when we are leaving childhood and youth behind, and beginning to gain the wisdom to navigate life's experiences on our own. We need to remember how challenging life can be for young adults as they find their place and way in the world, and in their spiritual life.

I think of Jacob as feeling burdened, shuffling toward Haran, kicking stones with his sandaled feet, trying to sort out all that was going on in his life. Things were not good at home. His mother Rebekah kept tension in the family with her favoritism of Jacob over Esau. She stoked the fire of Jacob's ambitiousness. Esau, the older brother, had been tricked out of the family blessing by his mother and brother. Esau was probably not the sharpest arrow in the quiver, and your heart goes out to him. He overheard his father telling Jacob to go find a wife from their own people and not from the Canaanites, so he figured he would do the same. Maybe that would earn his father's affection and approval. Here I think of young adults who sometimes find themselves still seeking the parental love and acceptance they may not have received as children.

Then there is old Isaac, nearly blind, and is being played by his wife and son. Rebekah's manipulations succeed because of Isaac's passivity.

So here is Jacob, with things beginning to catch up to him; his mother exerting control over his life. His brother hates him enough to kill him. His father is checked out. After tricking his brother out of the birthright and blessing, Jacob may be feeling anything but blessed. Now he is on a journey to find a wife, some cousin back in their ancestral home. This reminds us, by the way, that the Bible is not really about "family values", in the sense that some folks go on about it these days! Jacob is part of a confusing, troubled, and dysfunctional family that is supposed to be blessed by God. Yet, where is God and God's blessing in all of this? What kind of life, what kind of world is this? This may have been something of Jacob's state of spirit when he stopped at nightfall to sleep out under the stars.

Jacob dreams of a ramp—ladder is not a good translation. It is a wide ramp or stairway connecting heaven and earth. The heavenly messengers, or angels, are going up and down the ramp, fulfilling the myriad divine commands that govern things on earth (Gerhard Von Rad). Dreams in the Hebrew scriptures were understood to be the way that God communicated with people, revealing the deepest truth of things and providing guidance. So, in his dream, Jacob has stumbled upon central control, the connection between heaven and earth.

In the dream God tells Jacob he will be blessed and a blessing to nations. His offspring will multiply throughout the world, and that God will be with him and keep him on the whole journey, wherever he goes. This is a renewal of the original promise given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. In all of the mess and confusion of Jacob's life, the promise is still there. In that moment, deepest reality opens up to him, and he sees the connection between heaven and earth, that God is always caring for the world, 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 that troubles, perplexes, and causes us pain, God is with us. God is still calling us, blessing us, and empowering us to be channels of God's purposes. The world IS God's and everything in it (Ps. 24).

As we continue what is often a struggle to live in 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, that everywhere we can be is holy ground. The ancient Celtic Christians spoke of "thin places" places where the sacredness of the world is especially clear and strong. Native American people have always known the sacred dimension of the world. Biblical spirituality is also creational spirituality, awareness of the presence of God in and through creation. It is a presence that may be obscured by circumstances but is nonetheless eternal, steadfast, and life giving.

This is why our commitment to our own inward journey is so important. When we devote ourselves to regular times of prayer, silence, inner listening, reading and study, we are nurturing our capacity to be aware of the connectedness of our lives and life itself to all that is sacred. We do this even and especially through the times when we are most troubled, confused, or fearful. The more faithfully over time we continue our spiritual practice, the more our awareness of the sacredness of life will grow and deepen. The challenges, struggles, and troubles will not go away, but we will gain confidence that this world and we ourselves are never separated from God's presence, care, and love. With Jacob, we will say to ourselves with increasing frequency: Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it! It is waking up to deepest reality.

What kind of world IS this? The question arises in Jesus' parable. The realm or kingdom of God--life as God created it to be--is like a farmer sowing good seeds in his field. The servants discover weeds in the field and rush to the owner in confusion. 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. Do you want us to rush out there and tear up the weeds? No, says the owner. You will pull up the wheat along with the weeds. The plant referred to here was called *darnel*. It looked very similar to wheat, and its roots intertwined with the roots of the wheat. If you pulled up the *darnel*, the wheat came with it. No, says the farmer, you'll just make things worse. Let it all grow, and at harvest we'll cut it all down and separate the wheat from the weeds.

Isn't God's 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 about the origin of evil. He affirms the presence of evil, but is more interested in the good seed that God sows. We can trust it, and we can trust the farmer, that is, God. The existence of evil, the resistance to the way of love and to God's will for justice, peace, and compassion is real. Yet Jesus doesn't get focused on evil and going after evil. He teaches overcoming evil with good. Our job is to stay focused on the wheat, the good seed, the Gospel, the kingdom of God.

Jesus cautions his followers, then and now, against thinking we know how to go after evil and take it out. Jesus discourages our deciding who is "in" and who is "out," who is "good" and who is "bad," who is a "real" Christian and who is not. Jesus calls into question, through this parable, the crusading mentality. Jesus does not want zealots in his cause, who end up increasing the world's suffering.

Does this mean that we don't speak or act against the wrongs and evils in the world? Not at all. We need to remember that parables are not moral lessons from which we draw iron-clad laws of behavior. Parables are meant to stir up our imaginations and to help us grow in wisdom. I thought about these things on Friday when I was on my knees in the children's butterfly garden that had become way overgrown with weeds. I was grateful that Rob Field, Thom's brother, had volunteered to help get the weeds, at least for now, out of that beautiful place! When we do go after the weeds--those within us or around us--it must be in the truth, the spirit and the ways of the one we claim to follow. Jesus calls us to be wheat-centered, not weed-centered. Being wheat-centered means embodying in ourselves 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.

This points to our outward journey, the importance of discerning and remaining focused on what we feel ourselves called to do. In the midst of all that is discouraging, in the midst of our fears, doubts, and self-doubts, in the midst of everything that tells us we are to do BIG things and make a big splash, humble yet disciplined faithfulness to the good seed is what will bear fruit in and for the

world, and in our own lives.

Jesus speaks of the final harvest, the separating of the weeds and wheat. This is probably the main point in the parable, a reminder that the ultimate outcome of things is in God's hands. That outcome is already determined. We don't have to fight that battle. 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 of hearing God's promise of new life for us and the world. It is an inward journey of awakening to God's presence and leading along the way, wherever we are. The spiritual life could be described as waking up to the deepest reality of life: Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it! We are also on an outward journey of trusting in and being faithful to the good seed, the good that God calls and gifts us to do. There will be times when we wonder what kind of world this is and whether the little we do is enough, given the extent of wrongdoing that is going on. I think we will always struggle with these things, to some extent. Yet as we work as faithfully as we can with our commitments to the spiritual life as an inward and outward journey, we will grow in our faith, our trust, our confidence, and our joy.