

Sermon – “In-Between Places”

Scripture – Genesis 28:10-19a, Matthew 13:24-30

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Our first Scripture reading, Genesis 28:10-19a, references Jacob’s ladder connecting earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending bringing the two worlds together. This metaphor breaks through the ancient Greek worldview that earth is left to its own resources and heaven is a remote, self-contained realm for the gods.

Yahweh comes to Jacob, the fugitive on the run who is frightened, lonely and ashamed after tricking his older brother Esau and his father Isaac into giving him the birthright mandated by culture to the oldest son. In fear of revenge, Jacob left his homeland. As he journeys to seek safety with his mother’s relatives, he encounters Yahweh in a dream. This is the Word of God.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And Jacob dreamed that 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. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside Jacob and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[e] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel which means “House of God.” Amen.

Our second reading is Matthew 13:24-30. The weed alluded to in this parable on the kingdom of God is the “bearded darnel” known in the first century for how closely it resembled wheat in its early stages. It was almost impossible to distinguish between the two, and then one could not be removed without the other because their roots would become intertwined. So Matthew warns the struggling church in the first century that it may be more difficult than you think to distinguish the good and evil believers in your midst. Learn to live side by side, learn Holy Indifference and patience, and beware of hasty judgments. Listen for the Word of God.

²⁴ Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” Amen.

The title of the sermon: “In-Between Places”

The text: “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.’” Genesis 28:16

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, give us the courage and strength to live with the uncertainties that are a part of life. As we reflect on Scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

I cannot read about God visiting Jacob in a dream while he was exiled from his community for fear of Esau’s revenge--vulnerable, frightened, and ashamed, without remembering God also visited Ishmael and his mother Hagar when they were exiled from their community by Abraham and Sarah a generation earlier—also feeling vulnerable, frightened, and abandoned. There is a continuity of God’s grace in both these stories.

It is while Jacob is ‘between places’ that he unexpectedly encounters God in a dream. According to Old Testament Scholar, Walter Brueggemann: *“The event happens ‘between places’ where nothing is expected. It happens between safe, identifiable places. Here everything is risky. Here, a ‘non place’ becomes a ‘crucial place’ in Jacob’s life.”*

The transformation occurs during sleep. The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness (and, no doubt, unresolved guilt). The dream permits an alternative into his life, an opportunity for redemption, the possibility to bridge his past with his future and his mortality with the One who created him.

In Celtic mythology, the in-between places, those places of transition, neither one thing, nor the other are symbolized by doorways, shorelines, the forest’s edge, dusk, and dawn. These are the places of power, where the extra ordinary is possible, and where the bonds of reality and the everyday are shed. Because in-between places are places of light, they are sometimes referred to as liminal space and provide a threshold for change.

According to American Franciscan priest and writer on spirituality, Richard Rohr, an in-between place *is when we have left the familiar yet have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when we are between our old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If we are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, we will run... anything to flee the terrifying in-between place of unknowing.*

The unexpected grace Jacob encounters in this in-between place on the run from his brother inspires within Jacob a deep reverence for the holy. It is a reverence that makes him aware of his unworthiness and inadequacy in the presence of the immortal, invisible God.

Surely the Lord is in this place, he said, and I did not know it.

Jacob has been given a gift. He went on from this holy place to find a new life that would eventually bridge his two worlds. Jacob was not a completely different person, but he has changed. God did not weed Jacob out or cut Jacob off. God gave Jacob a chance to grow up, to grow out of his deceptive ways, to mature, and to develop his character through hard work and an honest living.

In the Parable of the Weeds Matthew offers insight into the God of Jacob. The God of Jacob's ladder who builds bridges and meets us at the in-between places also allows the weeds and the wheat to grow side by side.

Remarkably, this parable wrestles with the presence of evil in our world and the question of suffering. The servants ask 'Why are there weeds? Why do bad things happen to good people and why does a good God allow terrible things to happen?' Equally remarkable, this parable makes little effort to answer these age-old questions. Other than the affirmation that God is not the author of evil, (God did not plant the weeds, the enemy did) Matthew leaves the reality of the coexistence of good and evil as a mystery, another in-between place wherein we are asked to abide, to hold anxiety, to live with ambiguity, to entrust and to wait.

In God's sovereignty, evil is allowed to exist side by side with the good. God acts knowingly and ultimately for our well-being. Waiting enables maturation of the wheat. Premature "weeding" is bound to damage the immature wheat, and the weeds will be properly separated from the mature wheat at harvest time.

In this parable, Matthew affirms God's knowledge and power without turning to cliches and making evil a divinely appointed opportunity to improve our moral character or teach us a lesson.

There is something reassuring about a parable that simply tells it like it is—wheat and weeds, good and evil exist side by side, not only in our world, in our cities and in our faith communities, but also in ourselves. Besides acknowledging this truth, the parable offers us some practical advice as we live in this in-between place.

The parable reminds us that we are often too quick to classify people and label them good or bad without knowing all the facts. Without denying the evil in our world, Matthew's parable calls for our patience, maturity, and asks us to leave judgement to God.

Even though this simple parable has not fully answered our questions about good and evil in our world, we find strength in the assurance that the God of Grace and the God of Glory will give us courage and wisdom for the living of these days. And we learn, with the servants, to live in the in-between places with the presence of weeds in the wheat fields of our lives.

This is not acceptance in the sense of resignation; rather, this is a message of hope. By the grace of the God who meets us in the in-between places, we can live life joyfully, take risks regularly, seek redemption often, choose love in the midst of pain, and let it be. Amen.