



A sermon for a reconnecting EcoCongregation

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He 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 he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to the sky; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the Lord stood beside him 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; 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 in you and in your offspring.**

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." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 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."

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. He called that place Bethel. -House of God!

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in their field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

And the slaves 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?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.'

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; **the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the**

enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

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Let anyone with ears listen!”

What better starting point for reflection today on these powerful stories preserved and interpreted as resources for our guidance and nourishment today? That final phrase,

Let anyone with ears listen!”

a pun in English and in Greek;

the final phrase of our reading, which Jesus uses more than once, within a body of teaching on the importance of vigilance hard-wired to with responsiveness-to-threat throughout the New Testament.

And this is why, as a church of EcoCongregation Scotland - *though I gather you've got a bit lost with that identity, no matter* - as a church who at some point has had an openness to the integration of Care for Creation with your life, work and worship, your prospects for a harvest of spiritual resilience, of hope, and even some joy, are pretty good.

Though from what I've encountered recently of some of the workings of the churches, to talk in a sermon about the end of the world will come as light relief!

Because even if despair *might* commend itself as a merely rational response, hope, with eyes wide open, emerges as a far more practical and rewarding path.

The level-headed farmer who puts the brakes on premature weeding is both hopeful and practical, and intensely realistic. They don't hide from the truth, they don't pretend it hasn't happened, and especially, they don't pretend that everything's going to be all right because God's in charge.

Jesus is certainly not encouraging any such thing with this story. But rather alertness, cunning, hope, and perseverance, rather than neutral patience.

Our faith - *and of course we have no monopoly on this* - makes all the more sense, the more we allow ourselves to hear, *with such ears as we do have*;... the more we read, as Jesus assumed we'd be able to, the signs not just of remote poetic heaven, but the climate-bearing sky above you.

Jacob's dream of connection is the unveiling of a reality previously blinkered. Jacob's Ladder- *and by the way, there is a steep staircase in Edinburgh with that name* - connects not two worlds, but the upper and lower parts of the same town.

The parable of the weeds and the wheat follows after the story of the sower, in which, a scarily imperfect situation, nonetheless results in an abundant harvest.

Some seed is lost, some eaten, some strangled, but that's the way of Creation.

Which is also what the wise farmer *here* refuses to lose sight of.

{If the weed is darnel, by the way, it can only be distinguished from wheat late into the season. Scream "weeds" and you have no harvest at all.}

And so our early twenty-first century wisdom no longer simply writes off the birds and the weeds and the needs of the Earth as if these are in some sense evil.

The treasured hedgerows we've torn up in the quest for productivity, with their weeds and birds and biodiversity were

part of a wider living community, rather than something sustained by plastic barriers and by poison. The ocean floor is about more than catches of fish. Likewise the peatlands, treasures of carbon capture, in which we're filling in the same drainage ditches they paid folk to dig thirty years ago.

It's through listening to industrialists and planners, as well as the scientists who were gathered in Glasgow in November 2021, for the United Nations Climate Conference, that I've moved on recently to talking not just of a *climate* emergency, but a '**Nature and Climate Crisis**'.

It's so much more all-embracing that we'd considered. And it's about us too. As a friend in the South Pacific reminded me on Facebook this week:

We are a part of not apart from Creation ... we are the biodiversity we destroy...we are the biodiversity we protect.

Not just poets and preachers, but science too, shows more and more how what we thought was merely beautiful and therefore expendable, is vital to our survival.

That's what Jacob realised, when he set that stone in place and named nowhere in particular the House of God.

Indeed, as I look around the holy sites of Scotland, the thin places, as George MacLeod of the Iona Community liked to call them, we do not create, but we only *discover* the connectedness of holiness.

Discover rather than manufacture it.

Jacob, in common with prehistoric Scots and so many in the Old testament set up a *standing stone* to mark the site, but the *connectedness*, in a place was there with him or without.

As is their way, the ancient writers don't comment on the validity of the conclusions he jumps to after his dream of the complete interconnectedness of the sky and the soil, or '**Heaven and Earth**' as churchy folk like to put it, which is

fine, as long as we do not let *Heaven* be seen as a science fiction dimension of separateness, rather than including our terrestrial, pedestrian experience of Sky.

As long as, when we pray *in the way that Jesus teaches*, [lord's prayer/Our Father] we do not any more take for granted the integrity of heaven as of Earth.

Do we want God's will to be done as badly in Heaven as we do it on Earth?

But then the Prophets - *it seems pretty well all of them*- made that link between injustice and environmental harm that we've been content to write off as mere poetry.

The Psalms may sing presumptively of 'laws that never shall be broken' and of the reliability of the cycles and seasons, but it's all these things that are in danger.

Which is why, all the more, faith as a dynamic source of hope and of such meaningful action as is given to each of us, and perhaps to each church, each denomination, has, I'm comforted and encouraged to say, a value few would dare have claimed until now.

The interdependence, the relationship, the partnership with the web of life and the cycles of the Earth, which is built into the consciousness of the Biblical writers, is daily being reinforced by a culture of science which has long overtaken the brutal human utilitarianism which led even some churches to teach that our species was the purpose of Creation, of which, of course, we're the pinnacle, and to replace references in some bibles to "*all creation*" with the minimal "*all people*".

Life isn't like that. God's rainbow Covenant of Genesis is not just with Noah, but with all flesh: with the Earth.

I recently checked on the story of how in China, around the time I was born, a campaign to eradicate small birds like sparrows led to plagues of the insects the birds would have eaten. But like so much of our current culture, it's terrifying to take

the risk of moving on from the things you've grown up believing you can't survive without.

Which is perhaps why the UK government, disregarding even their own advisors, let alone those of the United Nations are hugely subsidising and issuing licences for new oil and gas.

To do so, in this day and age, is like bringing in a contractor to add extra weeds amongst the wheat. Indeed, given the harmful effects of darnel on cattle and people alike, we could be said to be a darnel economy, the enemy of which has begun at last to sow the heat of sustainable energy sources. Of sun, of water, of wave and tide, of wind and the deep heat of the Earth's self.

In this rather peculiar story of the weeds sown alongside the wheat, the ruler of the farm likewise counsels against a panicky tidiness.

Against throwing out babies with bathwater. Against the desperation which looks for absolute and watertight solutions, rather than transformation of a difficult situation with patience and cunning.

Though the mode of patience the church embraced as I was growing up, where wanton procrastination wore the emperor's clothes of wisdom, has run out of time.

As the heatwave here a year ago, and the frightening temperatures of mainland Europe this week will testify.

Of the various responses in our economy to the nature and climate crisis, none of them are perfect: electric cars need batteries. The sun doesn't shine at night, and the wind, as Jesus observed, blows when and where they will; hydrogen, craftily and cleanly made when the grid is overloaded is subject to regulations on transport comparable to those which insisted that early motor cars had to be proceeded by someone on foot waving a red flag.

But but today's batteries would have been science fiction ten years ago. Panic works - though only in the sense of being galvanised into ingenious action, rather than paralysed by fear, because you've become dependent on what has to come to an end.

Discipleship - because it was designed for the powerless, not those in charge - includes a goodly portion of craftiness.

This is why, the more we're aware of the crises of nature and climate, the more Christianity comes into its own by fruitful reflection with eyes and ears wide open.

As human beings, you have eyes, you have ears, or failing that, you have awareness of one sort or another, and indeed just below the surface, we have various levels of what have been called 'fight or flight'.

That, not the ownership of the Earth, is God's gift. "Wake up sleeper" -sang perhaps the earliest ever Christian hymn. We're recycling that once more today.

But reading familiar stories in radically different circumstances may rightly mean the outcome of our reflections, and the response that follows will differ from the last time round. get used to that. Celebrate it. Recognise it as faithfulness.

What Matthew then gives is not a definitive interpretation of parable, but a methodology of interpretation rooted in the experience of the hearers.

And that's the final connection today, the last ladder in place: don't be scared of letting the stories of Scripture speak to where we are now, even if that means a leap or two.

Woo-hey!

What else has the church ever done?

Be Church! have Fun!

Get on with it!

AMEN.