

Old Testament lesson – Genesis 28:10-19a

New Testament lesson – Matthew 13:24-30 36-43

While You Sleep

I find it interesting that after more than 50 years of reading the Bible and studying it very carefully in one of my professions, I can still be surprised by things I never noticed, or at least I don't remember noticing. One of those happened Monday at VBS, and it was actually one of the students who pointed it out. I never noticed that the Christmas stories never mention how long Mary was pregnant before she had Jesus. I've always assumed it was not specified because it was made to seem normal even though it was obviously a very supernatural event.

So as the student rightly questioned, since it was supernatural, why couldn't it have been shorter? I said that was a good question; maybe it was shorter.

I noticed something in today's NT lesson about the weeds and the wheat, or as you heard it called if you read the King James version, the wheat and the tares. I became a Christian after I had taken a year of college chemistry, and "tare" was what we called it when we zeroed a balance. It's the weight of the balance when empty, and we often used it as a verb. In addition, my first Bible was a Revised Standard Version, so it was some time before I heard the parable called the wheat and the tares.

But when I read it this past week I was struck by the fact that an enemy apparently had a batch of weed seeds lying around that he could spread throughout the farmer's wheat field. And I think for the first time I thought how extraordinary that would be. Why would you collect a bunch of weed seeds and then save them until some opportune time to sabotage someone else's crop?

A preaching commentary I read was critical of the explanation recorded because he thought it unrealistic. After all, he reasoned, all farmers "hoe and weed." so he thought this description odd. But I don't think people planted wheat in rows in those days. My understanding is that they broadcast the seed, which left just enough room between most plants for them to grow.

So if someone came right behind the planting and broadcast weed seeds among the wheat, they would all grow together too closely to hoe the weeds without tearing out the wheat. And by the time it became clear that many of the plants were in fact weeds, the roots could have been tangled enough to make pulling the weeds a losing proposition.

There is another problem with this parable and its interpretation, according to some Bible scholars. Jesus taught in parables; it even says that in this chapter. But speaking technically, this is an allegory. A parable usually has a single overall point, often driven home with a bit of a twist somewhere in the parable. But the various elements of a true parable don't represent specific things. The parable mostly points out a single truth.

But when Jesus explains this parable, he assigns parallel parts to just about everything in the parable. Thus, it becomes an allegory.

Personally, I don't see the problem. If Matthew calls it a parable, perhaps he had a broader definition of parable than later Bible scholars. It is a figurative story that Jesus told the crowds to teach them something he wanted them to know. Or at least, he wanted to tell them a story to make them think.

"Why is this preacher telling us stories about wheat and weeds and soil and harvests? He's not a farmer. He's a carpenter's son, and now he preaches and teaches about God and heals the sick and casts out evil spirits. Why is he talking about weeds among the wheat?"

As Joel pointed out last week at the retreat house, a lot of people in those days were involved in agriculture and they were more involved than just eating. That is my main involvement in agriculture: I eat.

But as people who worked with crops, I believe this parable would have given them pause as it finally did me this week. What kind of enemy would do such a thing? What sort of enemy, indeed.

Jesus gives the answer in his explanation. The devil is the enemy. And in this world there are people who are his workers. And they live among the people who are the children of God, the sons of the kingdom, as Jesus calls them.

There are people in this world who have knowingly or unknowingly given themselves into the service of evil. Most of us have known a few. I heard a podcaster talking about something along those lines. He was pointing out that most people don't know any murderers. But I've had two students who were charged with murder. One was convicted, and the other had the charges dropped. Some of you know the latter one. I also had a cousin who was brutally raped and murdered.

But that's probably nothing compared to what someone like Jim Bland saw in his career as a Chicago police officer. And law enforcement officers who work in certain specific areas probably see even more than he did. I would bet that some medical people and social workers also see more than their share of evil.

This world has far more weeds and far worse than most of us are aware of. The devil recruits them all the time, day and night. While we sleep, he is at work collecting the seeds of weeds to disperse among the children of the kingdom.

But the good news is that God is also at work while we sleep. Jacob found that out in our OT lesson.

He was on his way to the ancestral home of Haran to find a wife. This had worked out well enough for his father Isaac, although Abraham had sent a servant to fetch someone for Isaac. But Isaac sent Jacob in person, and Jacob obeyed and off he went.

It would seem that he had not gone very far when he stopped for the night. Personally I

question the use of a rock for a pillow, but maybe Jacob laid a nice soft bit of animal skin on it.

At any rate, that night he had the famous dream we refer to as Jacob's ladder. He saw angels going back and forth between heaven and earth. God spoke to him and renewed the promise he had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham.

It was a threefold promise. There was the promise of land. There was a promise of many, many descendants. And there was the promise that through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and through their descendants, all the families of the earth would bless themselves.

When Jacob woke up, he said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." (There is no record of how Shirley responded to this.)

But seriously, God was indeed in that place, and he revealed himself to Jacob there. But what if Jacob had stopped ten miles sooner or ten miles later? The fact is, God was going to reveal himself to Jacob no matter where he stopped for the night. For whatever reason, God had chosen this night to renew the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham's grandson.

Why didn't he do it in the day time? I don't know. He could have. Why didn't he do it somewhere else? I don't know. He could have. We can speculate on possibilities.

Perhaps he chose this place because it was not really Jacob's home. He wanted to show Jacob that he was available anywhere. That was not believed to be true of many gods in ancient times. They were believed to be powerful but only within their territory.

But the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not limited to one location. He is the creator of the universe and it is all within his power.

Perhaps he revealed himself to Jacob at night to show him what the psalmist would later write: "Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

Did you ever think about the world at night? While we are asleep, much of the world is awake. Certainly they are awake in places far away, like Asia or Australia or Africa. Europe is five to seven hours ahead of us, so they are up long before us.

But even not far away from us, people are active while we are sleeping. Sometimes when our windows are open, I can hear barges on the river at night. When I was a boy and we had no air conditioning, I could hear freight trains blowing their whistles at night as they hauled their loads along the tracks a few miles from our house. I have been in New York City in the wee hours of the morning, and the words of the old Frank Sinatra song seem to be true: it's a city that never sleeps.

It is comforting to realize that God is not sleeping, and he keeps watch over the world while we sleep just as he does when we are awake.

Sometimes people wake up or they lie awake because of worry or anxiety. They have lost their job. The medical test did not have a good result. A child is in trouble with the law. A teenager is pregnant. There hasn't been any rain for six weeks. There has been too much rain to plant. Or to harvest. There is a war that is driving up the price of fuel.

There is no time or place where God is not. When Jacob saw those angels going back and forth between heaven and earth, do you suppose that gave him a boost of confidence in the chances of success for his mission? Wouldn't it be helpful to realize that the God you believe in is even bigger and more powerful than you previously thought?

So when we look around us and discover that there are weeds growing everywhere in the world today, isn't it comforting to know that God has a plan? Isn't it good to know that it is not our job to save the world and root out all the evil there is? Of course, we should do what we can to stop evil people from having too much effect on things.

But if we feel like we have too little opportunity, or if we feel like there is never any progress, or that everything is going down the drain, we have this parable. God knows the enemy has sown bad seed among the children of his kingdom and they will be there until God himself takes care of the problem. God himself will separate the weeds from the wheat.

If you compare this parable and the other one in the same chapter, the parable of the sower, they give very different lessons. The parable of the sower is about sowing the Word of God so that people will believe and live as citizens of God's kingdom. The seed in that parable is the message of the gospel,

But in this parable the seed is quite different. We are already the good seed, if we are children of the kingdom or sons of the kingdom as Jesus called us. I think it is worthwhile to keep this distinction in mind. Thinking about the parable of the sower, we can certainly spread the message of the gospel and hope to see it bear fruit as people respond in a positive way.

Today's lesson is perhaps calling us to a less active response, but not a response that is completely passive. There is much evil in the world, and there are certainly people who are evil. Anyone who says that all people are basically good deep down inside has not paid much attention to actual people. Paul had the measure of human beings much better when he pointed out all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

When we look at the extent of evil in the world, it is clear that we are not going to eliminate it through human effort. It would be easy to throw up our hands in despair and say "What's the use of trying?" And it is true that this evil will be with us until God himself effects the solution at his final harvest.

However, it would be foolish to think that Jesus told this parable to turn his followers into hand-wringing, idle, pessimistic observers of the world. I doubt that it is an accident that this parable appears right alongside the parable that

talks about sowing the word of God's kingdom in the world.

These two things can be true at the same time. We can sow the seed of God's message among people, and we can be unsurprised when evil persists in the world despite our best efforts to sow the seed of God's kingdom.

God is active while we sleep. And even though the weeds grow while we sleep, the seeds of

God's kingdom also grow. Whether we are awake or asleep, God is working out his purpose in this world. We participate in that work with him while we are awake, sowing the message, praying, worshiping, serving. And when we sleep, we can sleep soundly, knowing that God is still in charge while his angels come and go all around us. Amen.