Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there. He took a rock and used it for a headrest and lay down to sleep there. During the night he had a dream: there was a ladder, standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven; and messengers of God were going up and coming down the ladder. YHWH was there, standing over him, saying, “I am YHWH, the God of Sarah and Abraham, and the God of Rebecca and Isaac. Your descendants will be like the specks of dust on the ground; you will spread to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, and all the tribes of the earth will bless themselves by you and your descendants. Know that I am with you. I will keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; I will not desert you before I have done all that I have promised you.”

Then Jacob woke and said, “Truly, YHWH is in this place, and I never knew it!” He was filled with trembling and said, “How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!” Jacob rose early the next morning, and took the stone he had used as a headrest and set it up as a monument, and anointed it with oil. Jacob named the place Bethel—“House of God”

Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23

1 O God, you have searched me out and known me; * you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.
2 You trace my journeys and my resting-places * and are acquainted with all my ways.
3 Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, * but you, O God, know it altogether.
4 You press upon me behind and before * and lay your hand upon me.
5 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; * it is so high that I cannot attain to it.
6 Where can I go then from your Spirit; * where can I flee from your presence?
7 If I climb up to heaven, you are there; * if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
8 If I take the wings of the morning * and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
9 Even there your hand will lead me * and your right hand hold me fast.
10 If I say, “Surely the darkness will cover me, * and the light around me turn to night,”
11 Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; * darkness and light to you are both alike.
22 Search me out, O God, and know my heart; * try me and know my restless thoughts.
23 Look well whether there be any wickedness in me * and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

Romans 8:12-25

Therefore, we are under an obligation, my sisters and brothers—but not to the flesh or to live according to the flesh. If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if you live by the Spirit, you will put to death the evil deeds of the body and you will live.

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. For the Spirit that God has given you does not enslave you and trap you in fear; instead, through the Spirit God has adopted you as children, and by that Spirit we cry out, "Abba!" God’s Spirit joins with our spirit to declare that we are God’s children. And if we are children, we are heirs as well: heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, sharing in Christ’s suffering and sharing in Christ’s glory.

Indeed, I consider the sufferings of the present to be nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. All creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God. Creation was subjected to transience and futility, not of its own accord, but because of the One who subjected it—in the hope 21 that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to corruption and would come to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that from the beginning beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the firstfruits of the Spirit— we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. 24 In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance.
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Jesus presented another parable to those gathered: “The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who sowed good seed in a field. While everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then made off. When the crop began to mature and yield grain, the weeds became evident as well. “The farmer’s workers came and asked, ‘Did you not sow good seed in your field? Where are the weeds coming from?’ ” The farmer replied, ‘I see an enemy’s hand in this.’ “They in turn asked, ‘Do you want us to go out and pull them up?’ “ ‘No,’ replied the farmer, ‘if you pull up the weeds, you might take the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until the harvest, then at harvest time I will order the harvesters first to collect the weeds and bundle them up to burn, then to gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Then Jesus left the crowd and went into the house. The disciples also came in and said, “Explain the parable about the weeds in the field.” Jesus answered, “The farmer sowing the good seed is the Chosen One, the field is the world, and the good seed, the citizens of the kingdom. The weeds are the followers of the Evil One, and the enemy who sowed them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world, while the harvesters are the angels. Just as weeds are collected and burned, so it will be at the end of the age. The Chosen One will send the angels who will weed out the kingdom of everything that causes sin and all who act lawlessly. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. But those who are just will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Abba God. Let those who have ears to hear, hear this!”
Today we're going to hear a word about the kingdom of God - or as the Inclusive Bible so powerfully translates, the kindom of God. but first we have to learn a new word.

That word is hin-nêh. Say it with me: Hin·nêh. (You can tell we did vacation bible school this week!) Hin-nêh is an interjection in Biblical Hebrew, like “Woah!” and “Ahem.” In English, we have words that function as interjections based on how we say them, like “Look!” / “Hey” and “now” are not interjections in and of themselves, but when I'm preaching and you say, “Hey now!”, you're interjecting to point out you're down with where we're headed. Hey now!

In our reading from Genesis - the story of Jacob's ladder - hin-nêh is used three times - THREE TIMES! - in just nine verses. But if you go to the reading in your leaflet, you will not see “Hey now!” or “Woah!” anywhere. Hin-nêh is left out of our translation.

I'm going to re-read the parts of the passage that include hin-nêh, translating it as “Behold!”

“Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there...During the night he had a dream: [and BEHOLD!] there was a ladder, standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven; and messengers of God were going up and coming down the ladder. [and BEHOLD!] YHWH was there, standing over him, saying, “I am YHWH, the God of Sarah and Abraham, and the God of Rebecca and Isaac. Your descendants will be like the specks of dust on the ground; you will spread to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, and all the tribes of the earth will bless themselves by you and your descendants. [and BEHOLD!] Know that I am with you. I will keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; I will not desert you before I have done all that I have promised you.”

Hin-nêh gets our attention and shows the build up of God's promise: Woah! Here's this place where heaven and earth meet. And woah! God is right there - talking to me. And woah...God is...with me? Me? Keeping me safe? Always? Hin-nêh opens Jacob's eyes to how God works in the world, from creation to Christ to the Spirit among us now: God comes into the world, offers promise, and - most of all - sticks with us. Hin-nêh.

We go from Jacob's dream to today's gospel reading, where Jesus is on a lake teaching parables as a crowd listens from the shore. Let's imagine ourselves there: The steady sound of water splashing against Jesus' boat. The air, salty and warm. We're standing as close to the water as we can get, to hear what Jesus says and cool our feet.

What have you brought here with you? Are you worried? Hopeful? Stuck? All of the above?

As we stand on the shore, Jesus begins to tell us a parable. We often think of parables as moral teachings, like fables, where we peer into some microcosm of the world, watch a story play out, and then learn what we should and should not do.

That's not actually what parables are. Parables don't give us clear answers. Jesus says he uses parables to intentionally confuse and elude people who hear but do not understand, and he only starts using them after his explicit teaching is met with hostility.

The other thing about parables is they don't center on us - imagine that! Parables are always revealing something about God, just like Jacob's dream. That dream is about how God lives and moves in the world. And that informs how Jacob is to live. Not the other way around.

Cynthia Bourgeout, a modern day mystic, uses the image of an electric circuit. A parable is the opposite of a circuit breaker - it does not try to control and protect the flow of electricity. Bourgeot says parables should be seen as wisdom sayings meant to shock us. It tries to short circuit the hold thing, and can leave us feeling in the dark.

Which, to be honest, do we really need that right now? I've been feeling around for a light switch for most of 2020. And it feels like the room, the world, is getting darker and darker everyday. I don't know how many more shocks I can handle.

Maybe that's why Matthew gives us “answers” to this parable just six verses later, making the parable into what I just said parables are not: explicit stories with clear lessons.

I have to imagine Matthew's ready-made answers come from a place of love mingled with anxiety. I want this thing or these people I love to be okay. The stakes are high, and I don't want them to mess up or get hurt. So maybe I will just tell them what to do or do it for them...Who hasn't felt that way? But here's the bummer: We don't really learn - and we definitely don't change - when someone just “gives” us the answers.
So, let's set aside Matthew's answers and anxiety, perhaps our own too, and let's move toward the struggle, the shock, of Jesus' parable of the weeds.

Now, in Jesus' time, more people would have known how to produce and maintain crops. Today, most of us do not. And, just as we lose something when translators leave out hineh, we lose something if we do not understand the setting of this parable.

So, I reached out to a friend who farms and whose last name is, ironically or perhaps prophetically, Farmer. With her help, let's travel from the shore to a wheatfield.

As we arrive, we see farm workers huddled together on one side of a field, hands on their hips, turning their heads from the field to the One in the center of the crew who clearly owns the field. We look at the field, an expanse of golden, fuzzy stalks. Wheat, just like we've seen in the pictures, but every few paces, there are these bursts of thick green stems pushing through.

One of the workers says, 'Boss, did you not use good seed for your field? Where are the weeds coming from?'

The farmer replies, “Of course the seed was good, but at some point weeds were added in. And whoever did it, is trying to hurt our crop.”

“Shew,” another worker says, “Should we go on in and pull them up?”

“No, no,” replied the farmer, “Wheat doesn't have a strong root system, and if you rip out the weeds next to it, especially if the wheat is young, you will rip out the wheat. It's not like our tomato plants that are sturdy, with roots growing all the way down their stems.

Now, they could withstand having weeds pulled up around 'em. But, if you pull up the weeds here, you might take the wheat along with them.”

“So what do we do?”

“Let them grow together until the harvest, then I will order the harvesters first to collect the weeds and bundle them up to burn, then to gather the wheat into my barn.”

So, where does the hineh go in this parable? I see at least two places.

The first is when the farmer and workers notice wheat and weeds growing in the same field. The workers are confused and likely upset. Things aren't going like they should - what does that mean for their season? Their jobs? Their families and well-being?

These are understandable questions, but the ones they actually are surprising: “Did you use bad seed? How did this happen? What did you do?” “Hey now!” Let's slow down. What farmer would mess up their own field? What workers talk like that to their boss?

“No,” the farmer says, “I used good seed. But you're right - someone has sewn weeds here. And I don't think it's an accident.”

The farmer is not defensive; does not pull rank or punish. In response to their worry and doubt, the farmer answers their questions and is honest about the situation, even though it's bad.

The other place I’d put a hineh is when the worker’s ask if they should just pull up the weeds. Weeds = bad, right?

“No!” the farmer interjects, “If you pull up the weeds, you'll destroy the whole thing.”

This farmer knows these crops, knows that to immediately weed out or harvest too early will not fix the situation. The weeds are too entangled in the wheat. We can't just make this problem go away. We must be patient. Patient doesn't mean passive. It means we endure instead of trying to tap out; it means we have more watching and tending to do first.

Where do you feel the shock of this parable in your own life?

For me, I think of the seeds of anti-racism that have been planted into my heart and my life. But our society also planted white supremacy in me, and I don't think it was by accident. As they entangle, I feel guilt, discomfort, fatigue. I want those feelings gone now. But if I rush to get rid of my discomfort, to feel more at ease, I would only strengthen the weeds of white privilege and white fragility - for those are the evils that allow me to live at ease while others suffer. And I would destroy any possibility for the seeds of anti-racism to grow.
As white people, we must recognize our commitment to anti-racism is fragile. We must listen to the wiser workers among us who understand how strong and pervasive the weeds of racism are in our country and follow their lead for how to make something new grow.

Through the experience of this parable - imagining the hineh, facing my own desire to get rid of weeds quickly, I notice - I can hear and understand - more explicit teachings or “answers” being spoken around me. After writing this sermon, someone posted a quote by Rachel Cargle, and I was shocked by how it hit me in a deeper and truer way because of this parable. Cargle says, “Anti-racism work is not self-improvement work for white people. It doesn't end when white people feel better about what they've done. It ends when black people are staying alive and have their liberation.” Neither my discomfort nor my hoped-for improvement marks the harvest time. Liberation does; always has.

Above all, remember, parables don't focus on who we are; they show us who God is.

God is the faithful. God does not turn away from us. When we are upset or confused, when we lament to or even blame God for what is going on, God listens to us. God doesn't avoid the truth of what is going on. God calls out evil. God is wise. God knows us and the rest of creation, intimately. God also loves God's creation, and will not destroy it. God bears with the entanglement of good and evil from a place of hope. God watches, tends, discerns, and works toward the day when we are free.

Parables show us how God lives, and that is what gets us through. When we face our struggles - bring them to shore, to the field - we won't find easy answers that make them go away, but we will encounter the loving and liberating God who sustains us as we work for the harvest.

Or, as Paul puts it, “I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us.”

Jesus does give clear answers and instructions - think about Cargle's quote or read Matthew 25. That’s just not what he’s doing with parables. Like Christ, these parables break into our world and interrupt the normal flow of how we live. If we’re honest, that flow wasn’t working anyway, especially not for those who Kelly Brown Douglass calls the crucified class of our own time.

And so the Kingdom - kindom - of God causes a short circuit, and in that moment of shock, there is space for something new. But the shock of God's kingdom is never bad. The shock is not that evil persists - what else does it have to do? The shock is not that we doubt God or judge and hurt each other. Though, Lord, have mercy. The shock is that, when the lights of certainty and comfort go out, we remember we follow a God for whom darkness and light are both alike. The shock of God's kingdom is always good news: “[and BEHOLD!] Know that I am with you.... I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”