

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Year A, RCL

July 19, 2020

North Fork Ministries

The Hebrew Bible

**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 heaven; 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.

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In the verses leading up to today's Old Testament reading, we learn that Jacob tricked his brother Esau into selling him his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew. Jacob's deception angered Esau, who sought to kill him. At his mother's urgings, Jacob fled his home and traveled through the desert toward the land of Haran, in order to escape Esau's wrath and to find a wife. Jacob was on a journey, a physical journey with a clear, intended purpose, but with a spiritual purpose as well.

The sun set on Jacob. Selecting a stone for a pillow, he lay down to sleep and began to dream. Jacob's dream is one of dozens of dreams recounted in the Bible – sometimes dreams containing God's clear direction, sometimes prophetic, sometimes with warnings, sometimes simply confusing.

Dreams were deemed to be of sufficient importance to be remembered, retold, and chronicled by scribes. It was thought that God spoke to God's people through dreams.

Most of us don't pay a lot of attention to dreams. We tend to think of our dreams as ways in which our subconscious minds process the events of the previous day. Jacob's mind must have been racing. He was probably feeling guilty at having deceived both his father and his brother. His heart may have still been pounding at having narrowly escaped his brother's vengeful knife or arrow. And he was certainly excited at the prospect of seeking a bride in a faraway land. It is the kind of situation that is ripe for dreaming – one that allows the creative power of dreams to propel our minds beyond the immediate concerns of fear and flight and safety and onto a plane where the creative imagination can come into play.

Jacob dreamed of angels – angels ascending and descending a ladder placed upon the earth and stretching to the heavens. The symbolism of this kind of dream is rich for us still. Angels are traditionally thought of as God's messengers.

Ladders in dreams can be thought of as providing access to new heights in this world and onto other realms.

In the dream, while the angels are in the background trekking between heaven and earth, God tells Jacob that the land on which he lies will be his and his offsprings, and that his offspring will be like the dust of the earth, spread abroad in every direction.

Jacob is tired and troubled, expectant and anxious, his mind filled with the concerns of his day – family squabbles, sibling rivalry, petty deception. And in his dream - God ups the ante. With Jacob's head lying on a hard stone, the God of dreams uses images of ladders and angels, and dust scattered by the four winds, to plant within Jacob's mind the seed of imagination - calling Jacob to a destiny far greater than he could ever envision. Jacob the younger son, the trickster, the deceiver, the mama's boy is given a hint in a dream that he is meant for greatness. He thinks he is running away from a brother and seeking a wife, when the dream portends a day when he will be called Israel and not just his children, but all the families of the earth will be blessed in him and in his offspring. The dream kept Jacob from thinking too small.

Suppose you had Jacob's dream. What would you make of the images of angels and ladders and spreading dust? Perhaps you are climbing a ladder of success. Where is that ladder leading? What messages might ascending and descending angels be bringing you? Ladders can provide access to high places, but we can also fall from them. Or imagine a ladder appearing in a dream in which you are in flight, running away – the ladder, and the climb upward might provide the only escape. The ladder might also be symbolic of a movement away from the false self to the true self, offering the opportunity to ascend to the spiritual heights God has in store for us.

Our lives are seriously out of balance. We spend most all of our time entrenched and in pursuit of a material world, while ignoring the spiritual – especially the mystical component of life. I often speak of the value of participation in the sacraments, prayer, Bible study, and meditation as opportunities to enrich your spiritual life. Realistically, I don't think that many of you are going to choose to spend your vacation on a spiritual retreat – especially not now, during the season of Corona. However, the opportunity to bridge the gap between that which is human and that which is divine, occurs every time you place your head on your pillow.

Each of us possesses within a deep inner wisdom that can be accessed by paying attention to our dreams. Our dreams exist just below our conscious awareness, yet have a powerful influence on our mood and on our behavior. Dreams can inspire us, warn us, frighten us, but we usually don't tap into the power of those dreams. Think of a dream as a portal to the soul, offering an intelligence not available in everyday experience.

Jacob's dream was clearly connected to the events that had unfolded in his life in the few days that transpired after he cheated his brother and left home - just as our dreams are often sparked by the confrontation we had at work, the seemingly unsolvable family problem, or the prospect of illness or aging. The dream, however, takes us beyond the concerns of the moment or the immediate circumstances provoking our anxiety and transports us to the heart of the matter, acquainting us with the deeper self, the source of what is truly troubling, and often presenting a path toward resolution. In the dream world the opportunity exists to experience what the Psalmist calls "the deep calling to the deep". Carl Jung said that it is as if there is within us a two-million-year-old person, a wisdom source that speaks to us through the language of the dream.

But that intelligence is generally offered in a language we find unfamiliar.

There is an extensive body of research and speculation that attempts to analyze and decipher the code of the dream – offering explanations for the presence in dreams of objects as diverse as freight trains to frying pans. I really don't know what to make of such analyses. There may very well be something to Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, pointing to the existence of archetypes, universal experiences that rise to the surface in the form of our dreams, but the meaning behind the dream seems very personal to me. Jacob's ladder, as a symbol, could signify an opportunity to climb to new heights for one person, or just be a way of escaping a tight situation for another.

Instead of focusing on a system of dream interpretation and analysis, I think that much is be gained by simply bringing your attention to dreams, "tending dreams" as the psychologist, Stephen Aizenstat, calls it. You don't dream much or you don't remember your dreams? Just hearing this sermon makes it more likely that you will dream deeply tonight. Just intending to dream makes it more likely you will recall your dreams in the morning.

Place a dream journal on your bedside table and you will likely have a dream to recount in the journal at dawn. Include within your bedtime prayers a request that God speak to you through your dreams and the request is likely to be granted.

And then, at daybreak, write down the dream. Mull it over during the day. Allow the dream to speak to you. Don't be too quick to interpret the dream or readily assign meaning. Allow the deep to speak to the deep.

Just as Jacob woke from his sleep in the desert and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it!" You may also find that this same LORD has inhabited your dreams.