

“God Is In This Place... And I Didn't Know It!”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

July 19, 2020

---

The Torah passage we were given from Genesis for today rests upon the central image of a ladder in a dream. I love it that this verse fell on the Sunday when we are remembering Jack Peters, who served our church as an Elder, and who died on Tuesday. Out of our entire congregation, I am certain that no one spent more time on a ladder than Jack-- I hear that even in recent years when his family was urging him to let the younger firefighters do the ladder work, there was no stopping Jack from climbing to new heights. While the angels in Jacob's dream, climbing up and down the ladder, were messengers of God, Jack was a messenger of rescue on those ladders.

Let's sink in a little more to the imagery and dreaminess of this passage. I want you to imagine yourself lying on the ground, with your head on a stone as your pillow. Now this does not have to be as uncomfortable as it sounds. Certainly, at least, for a few minutes you could do this, even you who have designated which pillows are the good pillows on your bed because they are so soft, or so contoured to the slope of your neck, or because the moment you sink into them you feel that feeling of “Ah!”

If you, like Jacob, had been traveling the wilderness for fear of your life, as you escape the wrath of a brother, Esau, who is angry because you've cheated him not only of his birthright, but also his father's dying blessing, perhaps this bare rock in the wilderness served as a certain grace. I wonder, what did Jacob see when he set his head back on that rock? Were there bare branches of weathered trees above him? What color was the sky when he began his rest? Did he see a change, from blue, to pinks and oranges and purples, to grey, to a dark indigo, spangled with stars?

At what point did sleep finally find Jacob? Did his mind stay active, restless with anxiety? Or was he so tired-- physically, emotionally, and spiritually, that sleep quickly overtook him? Sleep is the one time when we truly give up control. As it takes over us, our bodies are replenished and renewed. And sometimes, we may be gifted with dreams.

Today for us dreams are a curious story we may share with someone else-- “you know, I had the craziest dream last night...” At its deepest level, we may see dreams as revelations into what is going on in the subconscious mind. But in the Bible, dreams were always seen as the portal through which God communicated to God's people. There are over 100 stories or examples of dreams shared in the Bible. From Joseph dreaming about skinny cows eating fat cows as a way of realizing that there would be 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine, to Joseph, father to Jesus dreaming the message to flee with the holy family to Egypt to escape Herod's terror, dreams communicated important and holy messages.

Central to Jacob's dream while his head rested on that stone pillow, a ladder towered into the heavens, connecting from the earth, and angels-- messengers of God-- traveled up the ladder, and they traveled down the ladder. Then, God blesses Jacob, with place, people, and presence. God promises that the land where Jacob slept will become a place of blessing, to the north, to the south, to the east, and to the west. Then God promised that Jacob's descendants will be like the dust, covering the earth-- so many that all the families of the earth would be blessed through these people, Jacob and his offspring. Finally, God promises, assures Jacob, of God's presence-- steady and unshakeable, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you will go, for I will not leave you," God told him, "until I have done what I have promised."

No wonder Jacob slathered this stone pillow in oil before he left. Whether used for food or fuel for fire, the oil would have been among this traveler's most valued possessions. As the morning lights danced through the dawn's progression, he exclaimed, "Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it."

Jacob's dream had revealed a ladder to the Lord, a highway to heaven, a gateway to God. And, it seems, it had been there the whole time, but Jacob just hadn't known it was there. I wonder how often we also pass right by these sacred staircases, only just missing the chance to have a true connection with the holy. In Celtic spirituality, an awareness exists of what they call "thin places," where the boundary between what is ordinary and what is holy disappears. The experience of a thin place does not just bring us into a state of beauty, of peace, or relaxation. It can do these things, yes, but also, a thin place unmask us and transforms us.

As for Jacob, this vision gives him a sense of calling. He will not just continue wandering, fearful and lost in the wilderness. He sets the vision to be back at his father's house, this time at peace with his brother whom he had wronged. And, he announces a reliance on God in a way he had not yet spoken before. Finally, the pillow of stone which had made his bed, he promised would become a house for God.

Throughout history, people have found these thin places as places of transformation, for themselves and for the world. These places have not always been places of peace or comfort-- they may have had the harshness of a hard stone pillow in the wilderness. I think of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, where a young John Lewis helped to lead a march for Black voting rights, where those in power who resisted this change beat and gassed the demonstrators; John Lewis's skull had been bashed in by a state trooper's nightstick. John Lewis, who went on to serve our nation and my former district in Atlanta, GA, as a US Representative, died last weekend, and there's a movement to change the name of the bridge, from the Confederate general and KKK member for whom it was named, to The John Lewis Bridge. The bridge has come to mean something so much bigger than a way to get from one side of the river to another; it became a symbol of what we must cross, and how we must change, to unmask and overcome the sinful racism of this nation's past and present. The truth is, even today on this bridge, we move forward, and we move backward.

The truth is, the ladder in Jacob's dream led both up, and down. It is also interesting to note that Jacob, our dreamer, wasn't necessarily what we can consider a "good" man. He had the propensity to manipulate. He was greedy. In other words, Jacob was like many of us. God's choosing of Jacob didn't seem exactly "fair." But the Bible doesn't toss Jacob aside like a weed pulled before the farmer has the chance to decide whether or not it grows to bear fruit.

And, as it turns out, Jacob does have an important kind of fruit to bear. Madeleine L'Engle called Jacob's encounter with this ladder leading from earth to heaven a moment of at-one-ment with God. She wrote, "As I live with Jacob's story I see that there is more to him than the smart cheat, the shallow manipulator. There are many times when he so enjoyed the delights of God, that he himself became delightful." And then L'Engle wondered, "How often are we delightful to God?" (L'Engle, *A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys with Jacob*)

We all long to be delighted, and delightful. Let us then be open to how God might transform us, and be at-one with us, in place, in people, and in presence. Amen.