

“Jacob’s Ladder”

Dreams are an important part of our sleep. Some of us remember them; some of us don’t. Research indicates that dreams are a vital part of our mind sorting things out. Experts on dreams have concluded that we need to dream to keep our sanity. The famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud focused on dreams; the artist Salvador Dali used dream imagery in his paintings. There are significance to our dreams. I have a reoccurring dream that I am getting ready to take my college final exams and have not even gone to one of the classes all semester. This means my life is busy and I need to relieve some of the stress in my life. I have another dream that I am flying in the air, looking down at the fields. This is actually a good dream. It means that my ego is positive and I feel good about myself.

Today in our passage from Genesis 28:10-22, we have the story of Jacob’s dream at Bethel. Jacob is fleeing his brother Esau because of hatred and threats against him. This is because of Jacob’s duplicity. He is alone, away from home, and his future does not look bright. He is at his lowest.

Jacob has this dream of a ladder which extends from earth into heaven. We remember as children the story of “Jacob’s Ladder.” Ascending and descending beings are a part of Jacob’s dream, but they have no specific function. God speaks directly to Jacob in the dream. And this is what is important about this dream.

Jacob meets God. This is not a question of psychosis; this is not a matter of working out stress or anxiety or one's mental state. This is an external form of communication in which an actual encounter with God takes place.

When Jacob wakes up, he says, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." Do we at times not realize God is with us? The Rev. Emily Heath, senior pastor of the Congregational Church in Exeter, New Hampshire, shares a story which illustrates this point. She and a group of clergy friends were at a conference in Cleveland. They were at a breakfast buffet and so many people gathered around the table they did not have enough room. Next to them was a group of small tables with a "Reserved" sign on top. She asked the waiter if they could pull one of the tables over so her friends could join them. He said okay. He thought the party coming would still have enough room.

She and her friends sat and talked for the next half hour. They were having such a good conversation that they barely noticed the small group that came and sat next to them at the reserved table. The group stood up and left. A few minutes later, the waiter came up to her and said, "Do you know who that was?" We all said no. He said, "It was Aretha Franklin. She stays here all the time and loves the breakfast here." We thought he was joking. He wasn't. "No really---that was her, along with her security team. She always stops by here on her way to Detroit."

Emily and her friends laughed at themselves. Surely Aretha Franklin was in this place and we did not know it. The point isn't that Aretha Franklin is God. But this experience tells us something about our ability to see God in unexpected places. Emily writes, "I sat next to Aretha Franklin at breakfast without realizing it. Maybe it's not too much of a stretch to say that I might also miss God's presence in my daily life."

Upon awakening, Jacob realizes the importance of his dream, and he proceeds to interpret its significance. He has new knowledge---he has moved from not knowing God to knowing God and that God has been present with him. He thought he was alone. He is in a strange place on a journey away from home, told by his father to find a wife, and in fear of his brother. Even Jacob, one of the biblical patriarchs, missed God. Of course, it is challenging for most of us to recognize that God is in our midst, working and transforming the world.

This dream shows that God is not in a far off place. Renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the Gods. Heaven has to do with earth. And earth can finally count on the resources of heaven."

Once identified in the dream, God moves directly to confirm his promises and birthright to Jacob. God's promises are extensive; lands, descendants,

dispersion of posterity throughout the land, extension of blessings to others through Jacob. What is telling is that God promises he will not leave Jacob and will be present. Jacob is even promised bread to eat and clothing to wear while on his current journey.

Jacob has to open himself up to God. The challenge to us is learning how to really open ourselves up to God's presence in our lives. God is always with us, in our midst. As Rev. Heath writes, at the heart of Christian spirituality is the capacity to experience God's presence in our daily life. It's learning to find that God is indeed in this place and in every other place to which we go.

And then it is about going a step further. After we come to understand that God is with us everywhere---in our joys and our sorrows and our familiar places and our wildernesses, something incredible happens. We stop being afraid and start looking towards all the amazing things God is calling us to do.

I believe Jacob loved his home. He probably did not want to leave what was comfortable and safe. And yet, if he wants the blessings that have been prepared for him, he has to. He has to go out into the wilderness. He has to take risks. He has to dare to move towards a future that is unclear.

But in the wilderness he learns that he does not have to do these things alone. God is with him, even in the most unexpected places. He just has to open himself up to know it.

How will you open yourself up to God even in unexpected places? And once you know that God will be with you, even in these unexpected places, what will you do next? When you know you are not alone, a whole new world is opened up to you.

We are now in unexpected places. With the current situation with COVID-19, we need to remember God is in the midst of us. We are learning to be the church in new ways. We have learned to use technology to have video sermons. We have experienced drive-in church services. We have adapted our worship service to be safe while at the same time praising God. We reach out to each with the telephone, the internet, and Zoom meetings!

We are in the middle of a push for racial justice. Many changes are being proposed. Our comfort level is not what it was. But like Jacob, we have to deal with change and take risks. Of course, we do not risk our health, but we must be willing to take risks to change the status quo where necessary.

In the midst of a pandemic and societal change, we must acknowledge God's presence among us. We must open ourselves up to dealing with justice issues. We

must also remember God's promises to us. God has promised us the Holy Spirit to be with us, to comfort us, to guide us, to give us the wisdom we need. God will provide us with what we need in this time of change.

As Rev. Heath writes in a recent issue of *Christian Century*, she wonders when the church doors will be fully open again. She wonders when we be able to all sing. She wonders how we will celebrate the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. I think of the same things.

We do not know. But what we know is that however the church is gathered, in whatever form, God will be there too. We need to pray that we are able to recognize God's presence and give that presence the respect that it deserves.