

# *Dreaming Jacob*

Sixth in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

October 13, 2019

Genesis 28:10-22

<sup>10</sup>Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” <sup>17</sup>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.” <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. <sup>20</sup>Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, <sup>21</sup>so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, <sup>22</sup>and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.”

#### Isaiah 44:1-8

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! <sup>2</sup>Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. <sup>3</sup>For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. <sup>4</sup>They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams. <sup>5</sup>This one will say, “I am the Lord’s,” another will be called by the name of Jacob, yet another will write on the hand, “The Lord’s,” and adopt the name of Israel. <sup>6</sup>Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. <sup>7</sup>Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. <sup>8</sup>Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

It is hard to imagine which should have been worse for Jacob, his daydreams or his nightmares. Jacob was always trying to pull his brother Esau back in order to get ahead. This younger twin was literally born gripping Esau's heel. Jacob tricked Esau not once, but twice – trading his birth right for a bowl of soup, and stealing Esau's blessing from their blind and aging father.

Picking up where we left off last Sunday, at the point of today's scripture reading, Esau is angry, mad enough to kill his brother, and we arrive at this magnificent story through a trail of deceit kicked up in the dust behind a man on the run. If he had any conscience at all we have to imagine that Jacob was not a man who slept well at night, but this particular night he had a most incredible dream. I think about the beauty of this dream – angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven, and the huge promise once given to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, reiterated here to this scoundrel who cheated his older brother out of everything and I cannot help but wonder if Jacob had a dream catcher packed in his bedroll to place on that stone he was using for a pillow.

I became interested in Native American dream catchers when our family traveled out West some years ago. The origin of this art form is found in the stories and legends of spiders and their webs. Originally dream catchers were small hoops – round to resemble the sun and woven like a spider's web with a tiny hole in the middle. Decorated with feathers – the feather of the owl is a woman's feather representing wisdom, and the feather of an eagle is the man's feather representing courage. They are hung from a child's cradle to catch and hold back everything evil as a spider's web catches and holds things that come in contact with it. The dream catchers are meant to filter out and protect the child from all the bad things that might enter one's mind at night. Only the small hole, in the center of the dream catcher, would allow the good dreams to come through.

Jacob must have had a dream catcher. For he had to have been hounded by his guilty conscience, for all the wrongs he had committed, how he had lied to his elderly father, and what a terrible brother he had been. His evening thoughts surely must have been the stuff of nightmares, or at least the tossing

and turning of fear, guilt and regret. And yet, on that night between Beersheba and Haran, between his wicked past and a desperately hoped for more positive future, all the bad thoughts that should have gotten to him were filtered out, caught, as it were, in a web of protection. For through a very tiny hole in the middle of all his evil-doing the most beautiful dream ever recorded came through. Along with the angels of heaven going up and down, God stood beside him and spoke to Jacob clearly. God promised Jacob the land under him and descendants to populate the earth as far as his eye could see; God promised never to leave him but to go with him forever, *and* God promised that through him and his family all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Jacob woke up from that dream and had perhaps the first theological thought he ever had. “Surely,” he said, “the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” Jacob was finally coming to understand that he was not alone. God was in that dream, as God was in that place, even as God had been with Jacob – all along. Now when Jacob awoke having that insight and began to collect his things and move on, he did not leave that place a perfect person. He could never entirely give up his crafty ways. Indeed, his pledge to God in response to the dream hangs on one of those conditional if/then kind of arrangements. “If God will be with me, and keep me, and give me bread and clothing, so that I may return to my father’s house in peace...” he said, “then the Lord will be my God, and I will give the Lord a tenth of what God has already given me.”

This will never be our annual stewardship slogan at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church – if God does this.... this.... and that.... then I will fill out my pledge card... I’m just saying... Jacob does not do a 180 degree turn after that dream; as we will see he was still, in some ways, the same old Jacob with his own brand of bargaining. But he did experience a most glorious glimpse of God, and time will reveal that he was never quite the same again. Eventually reconciliation with Esau will come, hard won, because from this moment forward Jacob can never live as he had lived before, as if he were the only person on earth, and somehow exempt from God’s claim upon him. “All of which,” as one biblical scholar has put it, “is a cogent reminder of the power of the Spirit of God to re-shape and re-orient human life.” That’s why, in the dawn of a new day, Jacob took the rock which had been his pillow,

and made it into a monument, and named the place “Beth-el,” which means the house of God, and he poured oil on it to designate it a place of worship. Later, in fact, he will demand of his whole family the same devotion to the God of Bethel that he discovered at that sacred spot.

This story shows us how God is being revealed, making God’s ways known to the human family. In this family of scoundrels and sibling rivalry, and inter-generational plots about inheritance, in this family – very much like our own families – God is filtering through that which is bad and evil with a promise of blessing.

The story of Jacob meeting God at Bethel functions – as a giant dream catcher suspended over all of humankind, filtering out the evil, and letting the beautiful vision of God come through the center. God wants the stuff of our bad dreams, the things that are not right with the world – in our homes and in our community, in our nation’s capital, at our southern border with Mexico, on the northern border of Syria with Turkey... at the edge of glaciers melting and seas rising... and fires destroying forests and homes.

God wants the stuff of our bad dreams, the sinfulness of human beings, to be caught up as in a protective web so that the good dream, the dream about how the powers of heaven and earth are closely connected, can come through the center of our experience too. God knows there is an awful lot out there in the world from which we need to be protected these days. And, God knows, of course, there are the worries closer to home that keep us up at night: the battles with cancer, that illness that just won’t heal, the anxieties of new transitions as we grow up and as we grow older, the concerns for our children.... and for our parents, the stresses at home and the irritations at work, those significant relationships that have broken down, and the worries we have about our own uncertain futures.

Maybe the best individual and corporate prayer that comes out of this story is simply: “O God, give us a big, beautiful dream that assures us you are in this place with us; give us a big, beautiful dream that encourages us to remember that through us all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” I

believe God answers that kind of prayer with stories like this one, which show us how the distance between heaven and earth is merely the length of a ladder, and that ladder has God's messengers climbing up and down so that through the anxiety producing stuff of our lives this good dream will come through the center to us – like it came to Jacob.

I am reminded of those Palestinian and Israeli doctors who serve in the border regions of their land, where incessant attacks between Muslims and Jews, Arab and Israeli, have created a cadre of the world's foremost trauma physicians – who are equipped to expect anything. Just this past year a group of them were recognized by the United Nations as serving humankind beyond all the barriers that give rise to division these days between race, national identity and religion. One is a middle aged child of Holocaust survivors and father of four children. He works 15 hours a day overseeing the treatment of every trauma victim that comes through the doors of the Emergency Room. He makes sure his staff does not distinguish between Jew or Muslim, Israeli or Palestinian. It doesn't matter, he said to an inquiring reporter, "If they are hurt we do all that we can to heal them – it doesn't matter where they are from, or what they have done, or who they are." Another Israeli pediatric heart surgeon works with a group that has performed surgery on nearly five thousand children from the West Bank and Gaza, from Iraq, Turkey and Syria and beyond. She said: "Our activity is international, non-political and non-religious." <sup>1</sup> Our text would argue it is the best kind of religious!

At that dangerous intersection of clashing cultures, where every day brings the stuff of nightmares, is that not a picture of God's beautiful dream coming through the middle of life? In the dirt, not far from that Tel Aviv hospital outpost, a grandson of Abraham pulled up a stone for a pillow, lay down, and had a dream. "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Further, said the God of heaven and earth: "Know that I am with you, and will keep you

---

<sup>1</sup> [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), [independent.uk.co](http://independent.uk.co)

wherever you go, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

That is the dream God wants to come through the chaos of our lives filtering out the danger, the worry, the estrangement, and the regret, so that at the center of life, we see and we will seize God’s big, beautiful dream assuring us God is in this very place with us, promising hope for the future, for us, and for all the world.

AMEN.