



“The Dream”

Genesis 28:10-22

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I dream a lot. And, at least some of the time, I remember my dreams. Most of my dreams are full of people: sometimes people who are important to me, folks I haven't thought about in years, famous people and individuals I have never met. I am especially grateful for dreams that include those who have died. I find their presence in my dreams very comforting.

You know who has never put an appearance in any of my dreams? God. For someone who spends a fair number of her waking hours focusing on God you would think God would put in a cameo now and then. OK, so maybe I am reaching too high. I would settle for an appearance from an angel or Biblical figure.

So, let's just say I've always been a little jealous of Jacob's dream. To have a dream where you see the angels of heaven and hear the voice of God. Have you had such a dream? Do you know someone who has?

Surely, such dreams are reserved for good and holy people.

But, of course, Jacob is neither. He isn't good; he isn't holy. He is a liar and a thief. He's the younger son and younger sons don't inherit property and leadership. Jacob doesn't meekly accept his fate. He takes matters into his own hands. He puts on a costume and lowers his voice, stealing from an old and dying man the blessing that rightfully belongs to his brother Esau.

Not surprisingly, this angers his brother who threatens to kill Jacob. So, Jacob flees. He runs away. He leaves town. He heads for a place called Haran but it's pretty clear that he doesn't know the way. He's not prepared for this journey. He doesn't even have something with him that would make for a good pillow. He uses a rock instead. Don't feel sorry for him. It's his own fault that he finds himself in such a situation.

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Jacob's story is not a very edifying one. It could be. If Jacob was punished for his dishonesty. But that is not what happens. Instead, God bestows on Jacob a vision so beautiful that it has haunted believers and artists for centuries. Jacob dreams of a great ladder set up on the earth with the top of it reaching into heaven and the angels upon it; and there above it in the blazing starlight stands the Lord God speaking to Jacob words of benediction and comfort.¹ That doesn't sound like punishment to me.

Jacob doesn't deserve such a dream. Think of all the people who have prayed for a dream like that, people who have been honest and kind, hardworking and faithful.

Maybe, given Jacob's deceitful behavior, he needs the dream more than some others. So, what does he do with that dream? Does he change? Let's take a close look at what happens after the dream is over.

The next morning, Jacob awakens. The dream only lasts so long. He wakes up and – good news – he remembers his dream. And he seems to understand its importance. He says,

Surely, the Lord is in this place.

And then he takes the rock that has served as his pillow and builds a shrine of sorts to mark the location. Jacob – con man, liar – seems to be a changed man, a different man.

That is what many sermons about this passage conclude. Because we want there to be a moral to the story. We want to think that this dream wasn't wasted on Jacob. We want to think that Jacob leaves Bethel a better man.

But there isn't much to support that idea. Does he confess his faults, does he ask for God's forgiveness, does he resolve to live a better life?

Nope. That's not what Jacob does.

Instead, he keeps talking. He keeps talking. He's addressing God, the giver of the dream. God, the creator of the universe. Listen to Jacob:

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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God... and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat, A Chorus of Witnesses*, Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., 1994 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Jacob's trying to strike a deal with God.

Hey, God, if you follow through on your promises to me and give me food and clothing and keep me safe, I'll kick back to you a little of what I accumulate. How's ten percent sound?

Unbelievable. The nerve. The hutzpah. He's shameless.

He's been awake barely five minutes and he is back to his conniving, controlling ways. He returns to what he knows. God bless his consistency, his willingness to repeat his mistakes without learning from them. It makes him sound... I don't know... human.

We so want this relationship to God thing to work differently than it does. We want it to be a one-time, sign-on-the-dotted-line kind of a thing. Have an intense spiritual experience and you will be changed for the better for the rest of your days.

That's not how it works.

It was an amazing summer. I was 17 years old, a volunteer at a Presbyterian community center in San Francisco. During the week, I worked at a summer camp program, and, on the weekends, I explored San Francisco with the other volunteers. That summer I discovered I loved God and I loved the church. When it was time to go home, I thought,

Everything is going to be different. Everyone will see how different I am. More spiritual. More connected to God.

I made a list of all the ways my senior year was going to be different. I was going to pray every day. Take a leadership role in the church youth group. Treat my parents with respect. Go to church every Sunday. I was so full of resolve.

Things didn't go exactly the way I planned. When I got home, other people didn't seem to recognize all the ways I thought I had changed. I became frustrated with myself and others and my resolve... faltered. I started falling into old patterns. A month or so later, it was almost as if the summer had never happened.

I'm not alone in this. Something happens – a dream, an experience, an encounter - that clarifies what is important, what matters. We see clearly the person God wants us to be and that clarity... doesn't last that long.

Clarity is hard to hold onto. If it was easy, we wouldn't need to offer worship every Sunday. Think about it. If this whole experiencing God thing was a one time, see the light and you are changed forever kind of thing, then there would be no need to have worship every week. You could just come once, be changed and then be done with it. That's not the way it works. That's not the way we humans work.

I can only speak for myself, but once a week isn't too often to be reminded that I belong to God. Every week, I need to hear our story - a story in which the central character is God not me. I need to be reminded of what matters, what lasts, what's important. If I'm honest, I wouldn't have done any better with the dream than Jacob. Maybe, I've been too hard on Jacob.

What's the moral of this story?

There isn't one. There is no neat, tidy lesson to be learned.

This story feels and sounds true. It's an accurate description of our life with God and our life in the world. We have insights and resolve and we make changes and many of them don't last.

Here's the thing. Jacob does change. A little bit. He leaves Bethel with some sense of God at work in his life. He knows what holy looks like, sounds like, feels like, smells like and, years later, when God visits him again in the night - he is ready to go deeper in his life with God.

Looking back on that summer in San Francisco, nothing changed. Or everything changed. That summer planted a seed that led me to seminary and ordination and to the work that I do – the work that I love.

We do change. A little bit at a time. And that slow pace is OK. God is in this for the long haul. Even after Jacob's inadequate response to the dream, God's not done with him. God has plans for the world and doesn't wait around for perfect people to help with those plans. (Spoiler alert: There aren't any perfect people.) God works with and through the Jacob's of the world. With and through people like us.

We - who are more like Jacob than we may care to admit - God's not done with us.

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Amen.