

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 20, 2008

Genesis 28:10-19a  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Dream a Little Dream of Me

Today in our Old Testament Lesson, we encounter perhaps the most unsavory character in the Biblical record of Israel's ancestors. Jacob is definitely not what you would call a role model. He is a cheat, a liar; he can be cowardly and arrogant. He had qualities to commend him, but they were usually overshadowed by his failings. The amazing thing is that Israel got its name from this scoundrel.

We need to start by remembering the account of Jacob's birth, and his deceitful dealings with his family. Rebekah, Isaac's wife and daughter-in-law of Abraham, was pregnant with twins. Esau was born first. But Jacob already had a hold of his heel as they were being born. Even at birth Jacob was trying to get ahead.

Esau, being the eldest, was entitled to a larger inheritance than Jacob, and to receive a special blessing from his father. Jacob coerced him out of his greater inheritance, and when his father Isaac was on his deathbed, Jacob dressed up in goat's clothing to dupe blind Isaac into thinking Jacob was hairy Esau. The ruse worked and Isaac gave Jacob the blessing that belonged to Esau. Jacob had succeeded in taking for himself every advantage that was Esau's by birthright.

That was pretty much characteristic of Jacob – he was a heel, a schemer. Jacob made his way in the world by hook and by crook, pulling the wool over dumb Esau’s eyes. “Pick a card, Esau, any card.”

So Esau says, “After dad’s funeral, I am going to kill that little shyster.” Can you blame him?

Jacob gets out of town just in time slipping out the back door of the funeral home. He is now a fugitive, an exile on the lam, a man without a country. He had wanted more than anything to inherit the old man’s estate, to have it all, both his and his brother’s inheritance. Now look at him, out somewhere between Beersheba and Haran, which is to say, nowhere.

Jacob is alone, vulnerable, frightened, nowhere. That is where we take up his story today. It is night, that time when wild beasts roam. Jacob prepares to sleep by positioning a large rock at his head. We have generally heard that interpreted as a stone pillow, but more likely it was something, anything, to take refuge behind.

Have you ever slept like that – alone, threatened on all sides, nowhere, a long way from somewhere? This is a story about such an experience.

The striver, the grabber is here reduced to prey for wild animals; he is defenseless. His sleep must have been fitful, full of dreams. One has been recorded for us.

You have probably sung about it: “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, we are climbing Jacob’s ladder. Every rung goes higher, higher. We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.”

Freud told us that one of the functions of dreams is to recall meaning from past events in our lives. We especially remember

painful events, which bubble up from our subconscious as we sleep. One would think Jacob would have had plenty of trauma and shame to fill many a dream with Jerry Springer type admissions and revelations.

But no, not Jacob. No wallowing in guilt for him. Does he dream that he duped his dying father? Does he dream ashamed for how he cheated his brother? Nope! Jacob has a technicolor dream, a dream in which he, far from being nowhere, is at the very gate of heaven.

A great ladder, actually a grand staircase, is thrown down from heaven right to where Jacob sleeps. “And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” Angels are not necessarily winged creatures, despite popular religious culture. Angels are messengers of God. Ascending and descending, angels were going both up to God and coming down from God bearing messages – prayer going up, Word of God coming down.

Most of our dreaming is a one way street. Walt Disney’s Cinderella said, “A dream is what your heart wishes ... when you are fast asleep.” Robert Kennedy is often quoted, “Some look at the world and ask, ‘why?’ I dream of a world that isn’t yet and ask, ‘Why not?’”

Even our best dreams, our grandest, noblest dreams can be only wishes cast large. They may be projections of the best in us, perhaps, but still they usually represent the longing of ourselves as we are. We might hope to achieve such dreams, but we will hardly be transformed by **our** self-generated dreams.

There is something more, something different about the dream Jacob had. There are angels ascending and descending.

Jacob, you see, already had a dream. From the moment of conception, while still in the womb, he had a dream – that he

would be running the family business and big, dumb brother Esau would be waxing Jacob's Porsche. Jacob had been dreaming that dream, sending heaven that message for a long time. "God make me, give me, get me ...." It is very like the American dream, or at least what we have allowed the American Dream to become. Give me, make me, get me. We have perfected that dream and we would do almost anything to make it a reality. So, when we pray, we talk mostly about ourselves, and our needs, mostly about the fulfillment of our dreams and desires.

But angels were descending that stairway to heaven, so that in the words of Tom Long, "Jacob has a dream that God, in God's dream, has him." God will not leave Jacob alone until God's way for Jacob becomes a reality. Jacob may be a dreamer, but so is God.

It takes awhile for God's dream of Jacob to take full effect. Jacob awakens, and after being promised in the dream of God's steadfast commitment to him, Jacob says to God, "Ok, God. If you will clothe me, if you will feed me, if you will take care of me, if you will give me land – I'll let you be my God." "Take a card, God, any card."

But God refuses to let go of this grabber, refuses to be undone by this trickster. Unbeknownst to Jacob, God's dream for him is more than wishful thinking, and Jacob will yet be led to God's purposes.

That is still to come in this story, but at this point, let us note the bold claim of this chapter of scripture. Walter Brueggeman says it like this, "There is business between heaven and earth." Now that might not seem like such a bold claim here on Sunday morning, but try it on Wednesday night as you watch the news, receive the phone calls, and prepare to sleep. Remember, there is business between heaven and earth. Remember that when the pundits and the commercials are telling you it is all about the money, or all about our enemies, in other words only about the things Jacob

thought it was about, remember then – there is business between heaven and earth. We are not left alone, not even the worst, most scoundrelly of us, not even the most morally tainted of us; we are not abandoned to our own conceits.

The old song doesn't tell it all. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder, we are climbing." No, that ladder is a two way thoroughfare.

You probably thought you came to church this morning, because you are reaching out to God. But this story with all its angels descending, suggests that God is also busy reaching out to you. Our dreams may be more than just our wishful thinking. Sometimes our dreams are notions that only God can put into our heads, angels descending to us. Our dreams, even the best of them, dreams that prod us to study hard in school, to work ourselves half to death, are subject to divine intrusion, so that our lives might become disrupted and reoriented to God's dreams.

Jacob said, "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I didn't even know it."

God, in the midst of my dreaming a little dream of me, won't you please dream your little dream of me. God, in the midst of our dreaming our little dream of us, won't you please dream your little dream of us.

Thanks be to God!

*Based on a sermon by William H. Willimon*