



**“Place of Blessing”
The Rev. Drew Nettinga
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California**

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2011
Genesis 28:10–19 (NRSV)**

Unlike many people, I am one who rarely remembers the dreams I presumably had the night before. With the odd exception, try though I might, I awake each morning completely unaware of what I may have dreamt.

Years ago, while on a spiritual retreat, one of our group invited some of us to sleep outside in the nearby meadow in a dream circle, arranging the heads of our sleeping bags like the spokes of a wheel with a small pile of stones as the axis.

As the time for sleep approached, we slipped into our sleeping bags, and our leader poured some oil on the stones and prayed that God would illumine our dreaming, after which we drifted off to sleep.

When morning came and we gathered for breakfast, each person in the group had wonderful dreams to share and interpret. I, as usual, had nothing. I thought about making something up, but instead admitted that my experience had been a total bust.

Imagine my surprise, then, when around the time I made public my intention to retire, I started to remember my dreams, which I dreamt almost nightly, all of which had something to do with searching for something, someone, a direction, a solution to a problem, an important object. Some of what I remembered were merely clips from a much larger forgotten scenario; others were full-blown productions along the lines of an Indiana Jones or Laura Croft quest for the Holy Grail or Pandora’s Box, peppered not with movie stars but with friends, family, and colleagues. In one dream, even a theologian or two made an appearance.

Out of curiosity, I went online to look for potential meanings of these dreams. One site said that “to dream that you are searching for something signifies the need to find something that is missing or needed in your life. The dream may be analogous to your

search for love, spiritual enlightenment, peace or even a solution to a problem.”¹ That was helpful, as was another site’s additional suggestion that such dreams, “may also have you looking for something you may not find ... [that they may give] well meant advice to you that you are probably looking too much into the past, and should rather be getting on with things.”²

Interestingly enough, now that I have actually retired, I am having those “searching” dreams much less often and, for the most part, I’m back to my former pattern of not remembering much of what I’ve dreamt.

I share something of my experience with dreams because dreaming is central to this morning’s reading from Genesis – the story of Jacob’s dream at Bethel. Jacob is at this lonely spot in the wilderness because he’s on the lam, having tricked his father Isaac into giving *him* the blessing that should have gone to his older twin, Esau. In those days, such blessings bestowed all rights and privileges as the head of the clan; and once given, even if under false circumstances, could not be revoked.

When he discovers Jacob’s deceit, Esau is rightfully furious and threatens murder; Jacob therefore is in the wilderness seeking to put some distance between himself and his irate brother. He finds himself between a place where he is no longer welcome and one where he has never been. He’s guilty, defenseless, and scared; and he hasn’t got a friend in the world.³ And it’s dark, and he’s tired and needs to sleep.

At this point, our story spares us any insights into Jacob’s psyche as he falls asleep using one of the stones of the place as a pillow. But if we think of times when we’ve acted out of pure self-interest and in doing so have wronged a family member, friend, neighbor, or colleague at work, and then had to live with the consequences of their anger and animosity and possibly the disdain of others around us, we may have an idea of what was running through his mind as sleep overtook him.

One might expect, therefore, that his dreams that night would be filled with terrible and frightening images, the kind of dreams we might have in similar circumstances where demons and monsters chase us and claw at us, the stuff of nightmares where we sleep fitfully and wake suddenly with a start or a scream, our bodies damp with sweat, the blankets and sheets twisted around us. Once we’ve calmed down, try though we might, sleep eludes us and we toss restlessly, continually troubled by one disturbing thought after another.

Jacob’s dream is altogether different. He dreams of a stairway leading to the heavens with angels ascending and descending upon it. God is also there but instead of condemning Jacob’s treachery with withering words and threats of punishment, God blesses him, assuring him that through him, *not* Esau, God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah will be fulfilled.

¹ <http://dreammoods.com/cgi-bin/dreamdictionarysearch.pl?method=exact&header=dreamsymbol&search=search>

² <http://purpleshaman.com>

³ <http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or16-keeping.php>

Jacob awakes, realizes he's been in the presence of God, and sanctifies the place by setting his "dream stone" on the top of a pillar which he anoints with oil and names "Bethel" or "house of God," for as he says, "This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."⁴ For Jacob, Bethel becomes a place of blessing.

What I find most interesting about this story, and what speaks most clearly to me in terms of the story's message for us today, is the location of God in the dream. In some translations both in English and Spanish, God is located at the top of the ladder, as in the New International Version, "There above [the stairway] stood the Lord."⁵ In the translation chosen for today, as well as others, again in English and Spanish, Jacob sees God "right before him;" in our Spanish text, "de pie junto a él."⁶

The difference between the two locations of the divine is, it seems to me, a theological one. If God is above the stairway, then God speaks from on high as a potentate to his subjects, distant and remote. What's more, the place of blessing is seemingly unattainable. But if, on the other hand, God is right before Jacob, at his feet, then God speaks as a companion, still Almighty and Everlasting, still the Creator of all that is, but as a God who is much more present with and available to her people. And the place of blessing can be anywhere – at Bethel or even here at Eden Church.

Jacob's dream and the surprising reversal of fortunes he experiences puts me in mind of a verse from 1 Peter. Speaking to the Christian community to whom he wrote, the author says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."⁷

Again, though we are offered no insight into Jacob's psyche at the beginning of the story, we catch a glimpse of it when he wakes from his dream. He is terrified and in awe, perhaps because he realizes that he, a deceiver, a cheat, a liar, and a thief, has not only been in the presence of God, but has been blessed by God now and in the future. "Yes. I'll stay with you," God tells him. "I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you."⁸ To one who was "no people," comes the promise of becoming "God's people," a "holy nation," a person worthy of God's mercy and compassion.

This is God's promise to us as well. Even in our worst moments when we've acted foolishly or selfishly, when we've put our own needs above the needs of others, when we're culpable and guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt, when we know it and others know it, God stands before *us* with words of blessing – "I'll stick with you."

"The remarkable story of Jacob's dream at Bethel ... resists any attempt to find an easy moral. It is the kind of story that forces us to see the disturbingly unconditional nature of

⁴ Genesis 28:17

⁵ Genesis 28:13, NIV

⁶ Genesis 28:13, *The Message & NVI*

⁷ 1 Peter 2:10, NRSV

⁸ Genesis 28:15, *The Message*

grace, the grace that followed Jacob and his family and that continues to follow each one of us.”⁹

That grace is the radical hospitality and extravagant welcome of our stillspeaking God. It’s the gift of God we experience through Jesus who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly and without reservation. Given who we are as a United Church of Christ, given our belief in a Stillspeaking God, the progressive and open-ended nature of our theology, our welcome of others that seeks to embody the welcome of Jesus, the justice issues we embrace as a part of our ecclesial DNA, I maintain there are many, many folk in the communities around us who are dying to know that a church such as Eden exists. Perhaps some of us were once numbered among such folk, adrift, homeless, either literally or metaphorically, lacking a center in which we could ground ourselves and around which we could orient our lives.

And then we found Eden and, like folks before us, found a home and a place of blessing.

Think about it for a moment and ask yourself these questions: “How has Eden Church been a blessing in my life? In what ways have I experienced in this sacred place God’s mercy, compassion, and grace? How have moments of loneliness, fear, and despair been transformed by the presence of God standing beside me? How in the dark times of my life, in my own places of abandonment and exile, did I nevertheless experience the presence of the divine in such a way as to confirm to me that the promise of God’s love and acceptance still holds despite all the evidence to the contrary? And what was it like on the other side of the trouble to realize, as did Jacob, that, ‘God was with me – truly. And I didn’t even know it?’”

At Wednesday’s Worship Committee meeting, here’s how the folks present answered the question, “How has Eden Church been a blessing?” They talked about the strong sense of connection and community among church members and friends, of the spirit among us that’s seen us through difficult and challenging times, how over the years we’ve been able to disagree over issues and directions yet remain friends, sisters, and brothers in Christ. They spoke of the extravagant welcome they’ve experienced and the ways in which the community surrounded them with love and support in times of personal crises. They spoke of being reminded, time and again, that precisely in those moments when we feel most unlovable, there are people who love us all the more, and that it’s through that love that we experience God’s grace.

Eden Church *is* a place of blessing, and as members of this community who have been blessed, we are also called to share that blessing with others – to the guests who visit us each Sunday; to those with whom we work in the communities of Cherryland, South Garden, and the rest of the city of Hayward; to family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. We do this recognizing that it’s also a two-way street – as we bless them, they bless us; the circle is thus complete and God is there in our midst.

⁹ <http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or16-keeping.php>

In the unfolding story of Jacob we join him in a place of fear and vulnerability, which becomes a sacred place, infused with the mystery of God's presence. In moments of holy encounter such as this we are opened to the fresh movement of God among us. As Jacob discovered at Bethel, "The real voyage of discovery consists in not seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."¹⁰ In our dreams and waking moments, may that same discovery be ours. Amen.

¹⁰ Marcel Proust, quoted in Wood Lake Publishing tips@seasonsonline.ca