

## Meeting God in Surprising Places

Genesis 28: 10-19a

*Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 17<sup>th</sup> July 2005*

There's more going on *around* us than we know. There's more going on *within* us than we know.

That's what Jacob came to know one night in a dream. Jacob the trickster, Jacob the fugitive is running from his brother, Esau, running from God, running from himself. Alone. The sun had abandoned the day giving way to night and in the night Jacob gave way to sleep. He crawled up beside a large stone and slept – tired and exhausted. In that place unnamed, Jacob slept. At some place, this no-place, this non-descript place, in what we might call this godforsaken place, this wilderness place, Jacob was given a dream.

*Given* a dream. The dream projected the image of a *ramp* that went from the ground and reached up into the heavens. A ramp Jacob no doubt had seen in Mesopotamia, the ramps that were associated with the ziggurats of the region, the terraced temples whose top levels were known as the gates of heaven. The ramp is a busy place, fluid with movement, with messengers of Yahweh moving up and down, conveying the Word of Yahweh, conversing between heaven and earth. Then Yahweh moved up over Jacob as he dreamed, poised over him as if to whisper in Jacob's ear, "I, the LORD, am the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed. And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall burst forth to the west and the east and the north and the south, and all the clans of the earth shall be blessed through you, and through your seed. And, look, I am with you and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land for I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken to you."

When he awoke into a new day, the world had changed. He remembered what had been given to him in the night and said, "Indeed, the LORD is in this place, and I did not know." And then he was filled with holy fear for he realized the encounter and that place brought him up against the *otherness* of the Holy.

It is the awe that comes when we encounter the Other who is Yahweh,  
when you discover the land upon which you stand is holy  
and you take off your shoes  
or you bow before the Holiness of the LORD with humility  
and begin to worship like you've never worshipped in your life,  
for you are standing at the threshold of the Holy,  
the sanctuary,  
the house of the One who holds the universe in love.

This non-place becomes *some* place because in *this* place, and potentially in any place, the Holiness of God breaks through. I did not know the LORD was in *this place*. You see, there's more going on than we know.

Yahweh is closer than we think or dare to really believe. Even though Jacob is running, he can't run from God. Even though Jacob thinks he's controlling his own life, he is actually a

pivotal figure in the larger drama of God's plan and promise of salvation to provide a land and a future to God's people and nothing Jacob does – selfish, scheming, swindler that he is – is going to stand in the way of God's promise. But Jacob is more than just a pawn in a cosmic game that God is playing out. God wants Jacob to know who Jacob is and God wants Jacob to know who *God* really is. God's promise *includes* Jacob, involves Jacob coming to realize that the running can stop, that his life is of greater significance than his self-absorbed preoccupations and his fear and his shame. Jacob's life has cosmic significance. If he would just relax and stop running, he would discover that.

Jacob would discover that Yahweh is closer than he thinks. Indeed, he would learn that Yahweh likes to appear in surprising places, making mundane places, holy. That's why I'm repeated this word for often, because the text does. The Hebrew word for "place," *hamaqom*, came to be a name for God in post-biblical times. Rabbis have said that God understood as *place* encompasses the world, so that we might say, "God is the place of the world, but the world is not His place."<sup>1</sup> (Dwell on that for a while!) This means anyplace has the potential of becoming a place where we encounter the Holy One, that God is not limited to sanctuaries or temples.

The Celtic Christians believed that there are places in the world, like Iona in Scotland, that were *thin* places, where there seemed to be a permeable membrane separating heaven and earth, places where one felt really close to God. Any place can be the place where we encounter the holy, if we expect it so. I sometimes think inside of a CT-scan or MRI machine must be one of the holiest places in our world, think of all the pray that is offered up in those places, with people who are asking for and experiencing God's presence there. Or I think of a garbage dump outside the walls of Jerusalem, a place of execution that became the place where the glory of God's suffering love was revealed to us on a cross. If God can be present there, then God can be anywhere. Like a drug and rat-infested row house in West Baltimore or a slum in Kinshasa. God can be there. Those who have returned from their time in Miami speak of the surprising places and people in which they encountered the presence of the Living Christ – not where one might expect. Because there's more going around than we know or even imagine. But we have to be open to it; or pray that our hearts and ears and eyes are open to God's presence. If you do, you will meet God in surprising places.

But if you're the stubborn type, the logical type, if you're the type that only sees what you want to see or believes only what you want to believe, if you like to be in control, or if there is a Jacob in you, maybe running from God, running from yourself, then don't be surprised if God meets you in those places where you're not in control, where your defenses are down – like when you sleep, as in your dreams. Because, you see, there's more going on within us than we know.

*Just as there are geographical places that convey the Holy, that allow us to engage in heaven-to-earth, human-divine conversations, it is significant that scripture tells us there are internal, psychic places that are like those ramps, where heaven and earth speak, where we hear a divine word of promise and hope and assurance that direct our steps and waking moments. A*

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. Ed. W. Gunther Plaut. NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981. I am grateful to the Rev. Barbara Stumpf for this reference.

dream is like a ramp between two worlds, the conscious and the unconscious. But a dream, scripture tells us, is also a ramp between heaven and earth, between the human and divine.

It is not surprising that Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), shaped as he was by his own Jewish experience, would put so much stock in the power of dreams. His collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) was a bombshell upon the moral, prudishness of Victorian Europe, and one of the great pieces of Western literature.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Freud had problems with the notion of God (that was his own neurosis, which *he* should have analyzed!), but he showed us the power of the unconscious to shape our waking moments. It is claimed that the 90% of who we are is unconscious, leaving 10% for consciousness; like an iceberg, we see only the tip. The wisdom of that other 90% is conveyed to us through our dreams. One of Freud's students, Carl Jung (1875-1961), eventually separated from Freud (in fact, Freud insisted upon calling his students, "disciples"), by embracing the God-experience, instead of running from it.<sup>3</sup> Jung, the son of a Reformed pastor in Switzerland, believed that there are moments when dreams can actually be the mouthpiece of God, and perhaps the mouthpiece in an age that has become so devoid of God. If you want to know where God might still be speaking in our age, pay attention to your dreams. Now, *not* every dream is from God (thank God!), but every dream has meaning, multiple meanings and is given to us as sheer gift for the purpose of health and wholeness. No dream is given just to tell us what we already know, but something we need to know for our well-being.<sup>4</sup>

Jung was only reclaiming what Jacob knew: *that God speaks to us through our dream life*. Time and again this surfaces in the Bible, but unless you're in analysis, it seems, we don't tend not to take our dream life seriously, as aiding our walk with God. Genesis 37:5 tells us that, "Joseph dreamed a dream: and he told it to his brothers and they hated him yet the more." Is that your experience with dreams? Do you discount them? How often have we heard it said, or maybe you say it yourself, "It's only a dream" or "It's just a dream." There's a scene in the recent movie, "Finding Neverland," about the life of J. M. Barrie (1860-1937), the author of Peter Pan, in which Barrie scorns the use of the word, "just" – as "such a soul-crushing word."<sup>5</sup> Dreams are more than "just" dreams – they have immense power and when used by God, they have even greater power to redeem and help make us whole. For many years, I try to keep track of all my dreams and analyze them when I can. I have had one or two in which I know God was speaking to me – I absolutely know. They were significant, life-changing dreams that continue to shape me. There's more going on around us than we know. There's more going on within us than we know or imagine.

Maybe you're still skeptical. I have a story for you. During my time of research and preparation for the sermon this week, I came across an interview with the South African novelist and travel writer, Laurens van der Post (1906-1996), one of his books became a film, "The Lost

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<sup>2</sup>First published in 1900, with the German title, *Die Traumdeutung*, which could be translated, "Dream meanings."

<sup>3</sup> See Jung's biography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé; Translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Vintage Books, 1971, in which he vividly tells his separation from Freud, including accounts of Freud fainting (!) when the subject of God came up in a conversation, pp. 146ff. See also Jung's Terry Lectures delivered at Yale University, *Psychology and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.alivenow.org](http://www.alivenow.org), the "Fire by Night," discussion on dreams, "Ten Basic Assumptions About Dreams."

<sup>5</sup> "Finding Neverland," (Miramax, 2004)

World of the Kalahari,” produced by the BBC. I was familiar with the name, but didn’t know much about him. In the interview he talks about growing up in the Calvinist world of South Africa where he read the Bible and was fascinated by the importance of dreams. He later met Carl Jung in 1949 whose Calvinist background and psychological understandings allowed them to become good friends. Van der Post believed, “a dream is the instrument of creative change.”<sup>6</sup> In his interviews with the Bushman, he talked of one hunter who said, “There’s a dream dreaming us.” When pressed to explain, the hunter was moved by what he said and simply replied, “I can’t tell you more, but there’s a dream dreaming us.”<sup>7</sup> That has stayed with me all week.

Then, yesterday, I was roaming through a used bookstore, glancing over some books in the religion section when my eyes rested on the spine of one book that read in huge letters, JUNG. I pulled it out and discovered it was written by Laurens van der Post. So I went to get some coffee and sat down to read. In its first couple of pages van der Post talked about the importance of dreams, and then I discover he devotes two full pages to Jacob’s ladder or ramp dream, which he called, “the greatest of all dreams ever dreamt.”<sup>8</sup> Now, Jung wouldn’t call this a coincidence, but synchronicity (he’s the one who made the term popular). It’s a psychic message that says: *pay attention to this, Kenneth, this is important*. So I drove home and was about to sit down to write the sermon around 6:00 p.m. (I usually don’t wait that long) when – *poof* – the power went out in Dickeyville. A fire truck spun out of control on North Forest Park and hit a utility pole (thankfully, the firemen were okay). Frustrated, I packed up my things and headed for the church house to write the sermon. I turned on the computer, prayed and stared out the window to the north, when my eyes focused on what had been staring at me for weeks and I never really noticed it: a tree, with a ladder leaning up against it. But yesterday, it was lower down in the tree, so the ladder looked more like a *ramp*. The ladder. The ramp. The way of moving between two worlds – synchronicity. I got it and I laughed out loud: *this is important, pay attention, Kenneth*. I don’t know why. Maybe all of it needed to go in the sermon.

There is so much more going on around us all the time than we know. There is so much going on within us than we know. Our world is connected to another world and that other world, which is so very close, as close as our dreams is the source of and grants meaning to our lives. What matters is the connection. The novelist E. M. Forster (1879-1970) once wrote, “Only connect.”<sup>9</sup> What matters is the connection, the fluid movement between heaven and earth, up and down that ramp. Of all the commentaries I read on this text, I think van der Post gets at one of the key messages of this dream. He writes, “No matter how abandoned and without help either in themselves or the world about them,” – Jacob discovers – “men [and women] are never

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<sup>6</sup> Laurens van der Post, “Dialogues with Sir Laurens van der Post,” New Dimension Tapes, <http://www.newdimensions.org/online-journal/articles/singular-individual.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “Dialogues.”

<sup>8</sup> Laurens van der Post, *Jung & the Story of Our Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 12. The dreams, “remains,” he said, “the greatest of all dreams ever dreamt and the progenitor of all the other dreams, visionary material, and mythological and allegorical activity that were to follow” in the Bible.

<sup>9</sup> From *Howard’s End*, “Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.” (Chapter 22).

alone because that which, acknowledged or unacknowledged, dreams through them is always by their side.”<sup>10</sup>

The one who dreams through us is God – this a bold claim, I know, but the text leads us to make such a conclusion. Jacob didn’t even have to ask for help beyond himself, it just came. It was gift – *grace*. He didn’t have a dream, the dream had been given to him. And the dream spoke so clearly to his situation – telling him that his life is worthy of God’s divine protection and promise – “I am with you and I will guard you wherever you go.” When he realized that it provided the instant promise he needed to fulfill the meaning of his life.<sup>11</sup>

Then he did what you would do: he began to worship, *really worship* Yahweh and set up a reminder so that he would never, ever forget what he learned in that dream.

So, what is God dreaming through you?

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<sup>10</sup> Van der Post, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Post, “For Jacob had not even to ask for help from beyond himself. The necessities of his being had spoken so eloquently from him that the dream brought him instant promise of help from that which had created him, henceforth to the end of his days, and of those who were to follow in his way after him.” (p. 12)