

*How awesome is this place.* A sermon preached on August 7, 2016, as part of a series on Jacob, at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: GENESIS 28:10-22  
JOHN 1:43-51

Jacob sets out from Haran  
I wonder if he has even begun to grasp the magnitude and completeness of his exile.  
I wonder – does he fully realize he will NEVER see his mother or father again.  
All he knows as he walks along is that he is terribly alone  
He is banished from his homeland,  
Targeted for eventual death by Brother Esau  
Shamed before his dying father.

The stolen blessing and birthright hanging around his neck like a couple of millstones.  
An orphan in the wilderness – for wilderness this place is in terms of geography and topography.  
Big heaps of nothing – save for gravel, sand and stones.

Whatever path it is upon which he walks is certainly not well-travelled.  
Jacob is alive and his thoughts are not good  
As the sun sets, he crawls along the roadside,  
Groping in the near darkness for a place to rest.

His hands reach out and his fingers touch a round stone, still warm from the day's sun.  
Jacob draws the stone towards himself.  
Not the most comfortable pillow, but at least his head will be off the ground.  
He lies down.  
Text does not tell us how long it took for him to fall asleep.  
Even with his mind turning over all that has happened,  
Physical exhaustion would eventually make him nod off

With sleep comes what is the first explicitly recorded dream in the Bible  
What many of us know as 'Jacob's ladder'.  
A ladder set upon on earth that reaches to heaven.  
Upon that ladder, Jacob dreams there are angels ascending and descending

The bulletin cover illustration is a water colour by 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet, engraver and painter, William Blake.  
Blake is better known for his water colours depicting the Book of Job

They are wonderfully mysterious and evocative illustrations and when and if we consider Job in a future sermon series, we'll use them to help reflect on Job's story.

Here though is William Blake's interpretation of the dream in Genesis 28.

Two things of which to pay particular attention.  
 As the scripture details – Jacob is not the centre of  
 the painting  
 He's lying at the bottom  
 Reminder – *it may be Jacob having the dream, but he is  
 not the centre – the angels – the messengers of God and  
 thus God himself is.*  
 The messengers are moving quite freely and  
 unencumbered from earth to heaven and back  
 again – like it says in the text  
 Reminder – *the eternal is much closer to the earthly  
 than we might think.*  
*The infinite and finite are not separated by great  
 distances.*

Blake's biographers all agree that at an  
 impressionable young age, Blake himself had a  
 vision of seeing angels in trees.  
 Little wonder then Blake would be drawn to  
 illustrate this Biblical dream.  
 Good stuff – helps us all to see what is for many of  
 us a familiar story, but see it from another's  
 perspective in picture.

To come back to Genesis 28 – the verses  
 Jessica read earlier.  
 Writers, poets, philosophers, theologians,  
 psychiatrists, psychologists, dream interpreters  
 have been very busy for centuries, interpreting and  
 re-interpreting the symbols of the dream.

They often say things like – this first Biblical dream  
 paints a very compelling picture of the  
 psychological crossroads where Jacob finds himself  
 The ladder symbolizes Jacob's desire to relinquish  
 his boyhood and take control of his adult life.  
 He is beginning his ascent to manhood

These are all good and valid  
 observations, but when I read them, I want to  
 squeeze my way into such a discussion and say,  
 'yes, but what does this story say to God's people?'

Many, many years ago, Katharine and I were  
 invited to spend a week in the Thousand Islands  
 area of Ontario on an Island called Grindstone, with  
 our Old Testament professor, mentor and friend  
 Stan Walters and his wife Adrienne.  
 Stan was a very early riser and by the time we  
 gathered at a decent time for breakfast,  
 He had already been working on drafts for a book  
 on I and II Samuel he had been commissioned to  
 write for John Knox Press.

And he was full of energy and excitement and  
 eager to share some new insight or slant he had  
 discovered in the Hebrew text about Hannah,  
 Samuel's mother.  
 It was a fascinating experience, if not more than a  
 bit overwhelming to see that level of Biblical  
 interpretation and thought at work.

After speaking nonstop for several minutes about his new insight, his wife Adrienne – who was NOT a morning person – gently patted the back of Stan’s hand and said in a very quiet and no nonsense way, *‘That’s all very good Stan, but what does the story say to God’s people.’*

Stan stopped eating, looked at us, looked at Adrienne and said – good question – I will think on it and get back to you.

And he always did either later the same day over supper or next morning at breakfast.

It’s still a good question to ask, whenever we read scripture – whether we are preachers or not. What does a particular section or story or text say to us today? About what are we being reminded, Called to, Challenged?

Jacob’s ladder dream is unique to him, As our dreams are unique to us. But I think there are very important truths we can draw from the story, Without so pulling the story apart that we lose that sense of mystery, wonder and awe about the story.

This dream, as all dreams, begins with an individual – in this case, Jacob. We shall call him the sleeper’

We know from what the narrator has already described in Jacob’s story that Jacob is dealing with guilt

He is pursued by fear and doubt.

In other words, Jacob is a troubled soul.

All the things which anchor his life to this point – home, family relationships, familiar controls, and experiences, purpose – all GONE

He is the epitome of the Psalmist’s description of emptiness

I am like an owl of the wilderness,  
like a little owl of the waste places.

<sup>7</sup>I lie awake;

I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

<sup>8</sup>All day long my enemies taunt me;  
those who deride me use my name for a curse.

<sup>9</sup>For I eat ashes like bread,  
and mingle tears with my drink,

<sup>10</sup>because of your indignation and anger;  
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.

<sup>11</sup>My days are like an evening shadow;  
I wither away like grass. [Psalm 102:6-11]

Jacob is vulnerable now

He becomes even more vulnerable as he goes to sleep – because he is asleep.

But vulnerable to those feelings and ideas of which he may be unaware when he is awake.

Let's be frank – most of us are pretty much in control of our day work – schedules, expectations, responsibilities, worries, fears and hopes. But when we dream, then the night work begins for the dreams reveal to us what our conscious mind conceals, what we hide from ourselves or avoid thinking about. Those defenses we are so good at putting up in the day, disappear at night and we encounter another part of our self.

*This is our situation,*

*When we are a sleeper named Jacob.*

Our lives are not a Xeroxed copy of Jacob, but about guilt, loss, aloneness, despair, fear, worry, anxiety, regret we all know something and many of us probably more than we wish we did.

Think of the effect upon us of the death of someone close,

Or of being diagnosed as having a life threatening illness

Or losing a lover or a job

Or moving, or an issue with your child or children

Or your parent or parents if you are the caregiver

It is not unrealistic to see yourself like that owl in the wilderness described in Psalm 102

In our dreams, we may well question who are what we are.

We may be forced to think thoughts we have long avoided.

So as I said, the *first touch point WE ARE A SLEEPER NAMED JACOB.*

In the dream Jacob sees a ladder – some translations use the words stairway or ramp.

Some of us may have climbed this ladder in Sunday school, as we sang that catchy spiritual – we are climbing Jacob's ladder!

In our experience, a ladder makes us think of house hold chores or firemen on the job. A ladder is for access to high places, but not for traffic.

Is this what Jacob's dream is about?

We may have to unlearn something the spiritual has taught us and again I am grateful for our Stan Walter, our Old Testament mentor and friend's help. The Hebrew word that we translate as ladder is SULLAM and it occurs only here in the Bible.

It is not a word that translates easily into English.

Stan Walters suggested that the SULLAM is more like a fireman's pole than a ladder, ramp or stairway

None of us goes up there,

Certainly not by means of the pole, but when people are in need, help comes down to give it.

The stairway, ladder or ramp gives access all right, not for us to go up – Jacob never sets foot on the ladder does he?

It is for *heaven to come down*  
*It is God's messengers who use it going up and coming down.*

If we are a sleeper named Jacob, then  
 the message and promise Jacob receives from God  
 is a message and promise from God,  
 Not bound by time and space.  
 All the nasty stuff of our lives, which make us  
 identify with the Psalmist's wilderness owl, is NOT  
 the final word  
 The final word – whether we choose to accept it or  
 not – is that *in the moments of deepest hurt and*  
*vulnerability, the nearest thing to us is the divine*  
*presence.*

Here is Jacob – he has distanced himself from  
 family and he probably thinks his father's God.  
 But not so

**<sup>6</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.' [Genesis  
 28:15]**

How near is God?  
 Let down your defenses.  
 Stop trying to look good,  
 Stop your rationalization and finger pointing.  
 Stop criticizing others and you will find out.  
 Go to sleep and you will see,  
 All is not grim, despair, hopelessness, feeling  
 redundant and useless

Heaven's stairway is there '**set in the ground** (vs.12)  
 Thin places where the eternal and the transient are  
 very close are real  
 You are not alone  
 You are never alone – none of us are  
 We remain securely in God's hands.

The sleeper awakes, the dream fades, and the  
 stairway vanishes.  
 As the ladder symbolizes God's presence with us  
 whether we are sleeping or awake,  
 So the **stone** *Jacob uses as a pillow symbolizes Jacob's*  
*response.*  
 First, there is *awe*

**How awesome is this place! This is none other  
 than the house of God, and this is the gate of  
 heaven. [vs.17]**

We hear this word 'awesome' now much abused by  
 overuse, wrong use and trivialization – a victim of  
 the often banal world in which we live.  
 Yet,  
 it is a perfectly good word, for it conveys something  
 central to authentic experiences of God – the quiet,  
 unquestionable sense of the Divine, the Holy.  
 Impossible???? It might seem so  
 But God is real  
 Unseen – yes!  
 Other – yes!  
 But actually present to us

And when that happens, like Jacob we ARE shaken,  
reverent, changed and convinced.

For Jacob,

The very place where he had spent the night was  
changed

How awesome is this place (vs.17)

And then there is Jacob's vow

Jacob – the trickster we know

Jacob – the man who takes vows to God is NEW.

But then there are the words of striking a bargain,  
**of God...(vs. 20]**

The too worldly acting Jacob is still there.

But JACOB IS TALKING TO GOD!

Another touch point for us.

I think many of us are more like Jacob than we  
might wish to admit –at least publicly!

We respond to God in a way we are capable at  
the time.

If we are bargainers and many of us are, when God  
enters our lives, we at least make the response of a  
bargainer. More will follow...

That is, sometimes our lives are marked by  
striking, dramatic changes for the better.

We simply thank God.

At other times,

With other people

spiritual growth and decisions of commitment  
come slowly.

At every stage of our lives, what God asks of  
each of us, is the response of which we are capable  
of at that time.

Yes, Jacob bargains with God, but Jacob has  
changed.

He is never as he once was

God asks the same from each of us

Like Jacob, something or someone has left you  
feeling vulnerable

In that vulnerability you have found that God is  
nearer to you than you ever believed.

He is with you, speaking words of peace, comfort,  
hope and grace

Seize the moment

Make a response. ANYTHING is better than  
nothing!!

Start talking with God, whatever you may say  
Better responses will come

The sleeper, the stairway and the stone.  
Thanks be to God for his eternal word. AMEN