

LIVING THE DREAM

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Genesis 28: 10-19a

“Living the Dream” is a phrase we hear regularly to capture the idea that a person is happy and successful. I don’t know how common that phrase is in other countries, but it is common in the U.S. This is the country where dreams come true, a place where you can be propelled to a “good life,” defined by financial security, health, a supportive spouse, a nice place to live, perhaps one or two above average children, and a cadre of wonderful friends. The key element for most people is independence and control over their lives, doing what you want to do on your own terms. Yes, indeed...living the dream! But, of course, things happen, and dreams get derailed. Martin Luther King, Jr. commented, “Shattered dreams are a hallmark of our mortal life.” So, what happens to our dream of the “good life” when our health fails, we lose a spouse to death or divorce, our children have challenges over which we have no control, we have to move from the home we have grown to love, friends die or move away, or we simply see our independence erode with advancing age? The Old Testament story about the patriarch, Jacob, describes God’s presence in his life when he was afraid and vulnerable. The Matthew passage I just read speaks about God claiming the harvest of our lives where good and evil are co-existing. Now imagine that you have left your home and are in fear for your life. You suspect God is disappointed in you, and you feel disoriented. That is Jacob’s situation.

The story of Jacob, the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, is full of surprises. He is the second of twins to be delivered; his brother Esau is the first-born, and, therefore, the son who should inherit his father’s estate. But you will recall from Genesis 25 and 27 that Jacob uses deception to cheat Esau first out of his birthright and then out of the blessing of his father. Listen to the blessing meant for Esau that

Jacob receives from his almost blind father, Isaac: “May peoples serve you and nations bow to you. Be your brother’s superior, and may your mother’s sons bow to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.” [trans. by Richard Elliott Friedman] When Isaac realizes he has given his blessing to the wrong son, he trembles greatly. I’m sure he realizes he has changed the course of history! Esau, for his part, cries out bitterly: “Is there no blessing for me, father?” Jacob is a conniving trickster who deserves our and God’s condemnation. He is now living the dream, but a dream stolen from his brother. Except...Jacob has had to leave his home in fear for his life. He is vulnerable, and he has no idea what the future holds for him. He has gained material security, but he has had to give up home and family. On his way to stay with his uncle, Laban, in order to escape death at the hands of Esau, he stops for the night. He lies down on the ground with a large stone for a pillow and has a dream. But this is not any ordinary dream. This is a vision of God, a meeting with the sacred. It is unanticipated and unexpected.

God is getting Jacob’s attention. The purpose of the encounter is not to condemn Jacob for his behavior. It is not even to ask Jacob to change course. Instead, God reminds Jacob that he is part of something greater than himself, and God is with him in a future that belongs to God. We see a contrast between a blessing that can be taken or controlled and a blessing of wellbeing given as a gift. God reminds Jacob that the only blessing that counts is God’s blessing, and the promise he can count on is God’s promise to be with him: “And here I am with you, and I’ll watch over you everywhere that you’ll go....” If you read the rest of Jacob’s story, you’ll see that there are challenges he will face in life. Jacob’s life is full of conflicts. Walter Brueggemann comments that there is “a dark power at work in the life of Jacob.” This “dark power” is continually overpowering goodness in Jacob, and Jacob recognizes this. You can look in Gen. 32:10 to see where Jacob confesses his unworthiness in God’s sight. But the covenant promise of God’s presence and care is given to his grandfather Abraham, to his father Isaac, and to himself to reinforce its permanence through the generations. Jacob is imperfect and undeserving, but God has given him a purpose and reason for being that has nothing to do with

acquisitions, and it comes in spite of all in Jacob that is undesirable and negative. It is all about living with confidence in God's blessing. "Living the dream" is to believe that God has blessed a person—Jacob, you, me--to be a blessing to others because of God's claim upon that person not the individual's claim upon God.

Let's look more deeply at Jacob's vision. What is it telling us about the relationship between God and all of us, between heaven and earth, between eternal life and everyday life? Here is Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau's anger and threats. He has created a terrible situation for himself. His dreams of security have been shattered in spite of the powerful blessing of his father. The dream or vision he has at Bethel reveals to him a new reality. He **sees** the connection between earth and heaven, and he **hears** God's covenantal blessing. Heaven and earth are connected by a ladder or ramp with divine beings ascending and descending, meaning that earth and heaven are not independent realities. This is an amazing revelation. Suddenly now, as Walter Brueggemann points out, a future with God makes sense, a future with God is a reasonable expectation. Furthermore, Jacob then finds God standing over him extending the covenant of blessing to him. Jacob had not sought this out. God's appearance is unexpected and unanticipated. In his time of great need Jacob receives reassurance that God's promises for care and a future with God can be depended upon. As Brueggemann has stated, Jacob's dream permits entry of an alternative future with God. It is not a future that Jacob had considered. He simply wanted to escape his brother's wrath. But it is a future to which he and we must continually be open. "Living the dream" should be about God's intention for each one of us. Let me repeat that: "Living the dream" should be about God's intention for you, individually and as a community of faith.

What is this future with God? How does this speak to each one of us—today? When we have created a future for ourselves and find ourselves vulnerable and disappointed in the future we see, what does it mean to claim and be claimed by an alternative future with God? Delving deeply into Jacob's story gives me these three

convictions. First, God's visits to Jacob, like his visits to us, are unexpected and unanticipated. We cannot manipulate God's presence. Rather, we wait patiently for the God who comes to us to confirm God's love for us. This hope and patient waiting is, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, the hallmark of faith. We must be attentive to these "God moments," whether they come during sleep or wakefulness. It could be a moment when we suddenly and unexpectedly perceive our oneness with nature. It could be a moment when we experience unconditional love and the meaning that gives to our living. It is a moment of connection. It is a moment of affirmation of our value to God.

A second conviction is that God's promise is a covenant. There are obligations on both sides. God gives Jacob land and descendants. He promises to bless all the families of the earth through Jacob. He promises to be with Jacob and watch over him wherever he goes, and bring him home, and never leave him until God accomplishes all that he has promised. Jacob, for his part, promises to make the God of history his God and pay attention to what he owes to God. Jesus Christ extended this covenant to all humankind to the ends of the earth. It is not tied to land, but in all other respects it is the same covenant—a covenant of grace and presence. It is also permanent, unlike human covenants that are time-limited and conditional.

Finally, this alternative future with God has no end in time. It is a future based on God's promise to remain connected to Jacob and his descendants, and all of us through Christ, until God accomplishes all that God intends. It is a future in which God and we are co-creators, as we are guided and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It is a future dependent not on our abilities but on our attention to God's presence. It is about recognizing this closeness between heaven and earth even as we observe all the troubles and brokenness of this world. We acknowledge this connection whenever we pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...." It is to experience the power of unconditional love to bring meaning into situations of hopelessness.

We must treasure those moments when we feel God's presence and try to remain open to God's future.

I began with a description of shattered dreams. That phrase came from a man who had a dream, more a vision, of a world where, he said, "...my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In a sermon entitled, "Shattered Dreams," Dr. King made this statement: "Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God." This faith has its foundation on hope in a future God creates with humanity, with us. Jacob experienced this promise of an alternative future, and it gave him courage to follow God's leading and not despair.

Our challenge is to believe, as those claimed by Jesus Christ, in that same covenant promise that assures us of God's presence and care in this life and beyond this life.

Most of us, at times, struggle to hold onto hope when the life we have valued has been radically changed by diminished abilities or illness or disease or trauma or dislocation. Our challenge is to imagine a future with God that depends for its hopefulness not on our own control but on the presence of God, the God who doesn't control our future but promises to be with us in it. Then, we set aside our personal disappointments to recognize God's intention for us. The challenge is to be attentive this week to "God moments" when we have a vision of God's loving presence and the close proximity of the sacred. It may be in this worship space. It may be during a ministry like Food Cupboard or Dining Room Ministry. It may be the sight of a flower that has broken through concrete. Be attentive to every moment when you experience the proximity of heaven and earth, the sacred and our everyday life. And may we all live with hope into the future God travels with us. Amen.