

“Stone Pillows”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, July 19th, 2020

Genesis 28:10-19

Jacob had been through some pretty rough family dynamics. He is a twin brother to Esau. Their parents are Rebekah and Isaac. In Genesis 27, Jacob tricks his father into granting him the patriarchal blessing which should have gone to the first born twin, Esau. What makes it worse is that his mother aids in his deceit.

Chapter 28 finds Jacob fleeing from the family home, his brother intent on killing him because of the deception. Jacob travels as far as he can and when he can walk no further, he lies down to sleep. He looks about him for something to lay his head upon and he finds a stone. He tucks up against it, and soon he is fast asleep, exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally from all that has happened.

And he dreams.

He dreams of a ladder. And the ladder reaches from the earth to heaven. And there are angels ascending and descending on it. And God is there beside him. And God says, “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I will not leave you.” When he wakes up from the dream, Jacob is startled to realize that God had been there. ‘Surely God was here and I didn’t know it.’ He gets up, pours some oil on the stone that had been his pillow, and calls the place Bethel – which in Hebrew means House of God.

That stone pillow wasn’t forgotten. History tells us that others also found a stone pillow, their pillow of choice. A historian writes, “We are used to associating stone crosses and stone buildings with Celtic monks of the 8th - 10th centuries. But Jacob's story, too, brought stone into the monastic life. We hear of a specific instance from Adomnan, biographer of Columba. In his *Vita Columbae* he writes: “The saint went to the church to the nocturnal vigils of the Lord's Day; and so soon as this was over, he returned to his chamber, and spent the remainder of the night on his bed, where he had a bare flag for his couch, and for his pillow a stone, which stands to this day as a kind of monument beside his grave.” They added that Columba was not the only monk to use a stone for a pillow. Some stones were carved with a cross, identifying them as more than purely natural stones. Stone pillows have been discovered on the Shiant Islands, off the west coast of Scotland, dating from the seventh and tenth centuries.”¹

Artists have long been drawn to this evocative image of the staircase and angels – from Rembrandt to Marc Chagall. Jacob’s ladder is immortalized in architecture, with the front of Bath Abbey, in Bath, England, adorned with carved ladders to the height of the church, and angels carved into the stairs, ascending and descending.

The Genesis dream story easily found its place among the dreamers of the early church, who hoped to one day have a vision from God placed into their dreams.

¹ http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2014/07/he-put-it-under-his-head_13.html

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher and is known most for his work on the secular age. His theory includes a very convincing survey of the centuries of early Christendom to today. As Andrew Root will note: “Charles Taylor says there were no atheists in 1500; there was no way to conceive of your world without divine action, and enchantment, at its center ... Therefore, “one could not but encounter God everywhere”; divine action was ever clear.”² In the early centuries after the death of Christ, the sacred and the everyday were one, merged, undivorceable. From the early church fathers in the third century to the sixteenth century, the sacred and the secular were one. The Genesis passage of a dream of Jacob would have been imaginable, desired and believed.

Jacob said, “Surely God was here and I didn’t know it.” He knew enough to know the signs of God and recognized the presence of the divine in that place. Would a young Jacob today, lying on a park bench, the concrete arm rest as their pillow, having had a similar dream, be able to say, “Surely God was here and I didn’t know it.”

We are in a Post-Christendom era now, where the culture has different ideas now about the place of church and religion within its ethos. Stuart Murray defines Post-Christendom as “the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.”³

Today, there is a big divide, that grows wider with every passing year, in the world’s relationship between the sacred and the secular. They’ve been separate for a long time now. As Andrew Root observes, “The roads that once seemed to connect us directly to the divine appear either closed or uncomfortably bumpy.”⁴

Here is the question. Will our culture pick up the sacred vibes of this dream with its ladder from here to heaven in the same way previous generations have? Andrew Root is pessimistic: “We have arrived in a secular age not because people no longer see it as necessary to go to church but rather because the very idea that there could be a personal God who orders and acts in the cosmos has become unbelievable ... or we could say that we now live in a world where it is quite easy to forget, deny, or simply not care that there is a transcendent dimension to reality.”⁵

It would seem that a dreamer with their stone pillow might have no place to dream in our present context. Can this story of Jacob the dreamer have relevance in a world that might be too secular to give it a second look?

We have a lot of dreamers in our midst. But their dreams are tied to a shocking do or die undercurrent. Greta Thunberg said last year, “I have a dream that the people in power, as well as the media, start treating this [climate] crisis like the existential emergency it is ... I have many

² Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 116.

³ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 21.

⁴ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, xix.

⁵ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 5.

dreams ... Yes, we need dreams, we cannot live without dreams. But there's a time and place for everything. And dreams cannot stand in the way of telling it like it is."⁶

Martin Luther King Jr's dream for economic justice and social justice for African Americans continues on in the protests and voices of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation commission continues on in the voices that call for the rights of indigenous peoples in Canada.

Dreams in our time seem to have become about a life or death reality. They no longer carry the Hollywood aura of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow'. You know those lyrics, "Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue. And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true."

We need our dreamers.

We need the dreamers in a world that is characterized by the death of dreams, dreams crushed by the weight of voices and regimes that don't believe in dreams but only in what they can see through their own eyes.

We need our dreamers who will tell us there is *more* than what we see. The Jacobs are in our midst, the Jacobs who still dream, the Jacobs who still wake up from the dream knowing that the presence of God is very near. We need the dreamers who will see and tell us, 'Surely God was here but you didn't know it.'

Nurture our dreamers. Give them space to dream. Give *us* space to hear them. For they will see the things we do not.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Greta Thunberg, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* (Canada: Penguin Random House UK, 2019), 86.