

Season after Pentecost - Jacob's Dream

September 24, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 1:50-51; Genesis 27: 1-4; 15-27a; 41-45; 28: 10-17

This sermon is largely taken from sermons by Barry J. Robinson and Barbara Brown Taylor. I am grateful for their insights and wonderfully chosen words.

“In the television series and movie, The Fugitive, Dr. Richard Kincaid is a man on the run from the law. Wrongly accused and then found guilty of his wife’s brutal murder, he escapes his own death sentence by miraculously surviving a terrible accident and then by managing to elude a relentless police detective. He is a man for whom we cannot help but feel sympathy and compassion... There is something about the underdog, the decent person who has been dealt a bad hand by life with which just about any of us can immediately identify. We cannot help pulling for this guy to make it in the end because we want to believe that somehow, somewhere goodness is on our side. That justice will prevail. That right will win out. That God will not forget us.”¹

Jacob is a fugitive in this week’s reading but he is not the kind of fugitive that gains our sympathy. Jacob is “a two-time double crosser, who has robbed his brother of his birthright and his blessing. He is an accomplished deceiver, who has pulled the wool over his own smooth hands and his father’s blind eyes in order to steal what he wants.”² He is a con man, who learned well from his mother, to twist the truth and play on the weaknesses of others. His mother has connived a story to get Jacob away for his brother’s wrath and Isaac plays along. So Jacob is on the “lam between a place where he is no longer welcome and a place where he has never been. He is guilty, defenseless and [likely] scared. Worn-out and strung-out, he lies down under the night sky with nothing but a stone for a pillow.”³

There he has a dream of a ladder that stretches from earth to heaven, with angels descending and ascending. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “If the Dream-Giver [the Lord] makes mistakes, this looks like one. There must be a hundred people back in the promised land who have prayed for a dream like this, people who have kept their vows and done

their duties, dedicating themselves to the service of God. Jacob is **not** one of them. He is on no vision quest; he has simply pushed his luck too far and has left town in a hurry. He is between times and places, in a limbo of his own making. The promised land is a memory; Haran is no more than a name on a map; Jacob is nowhere, which is where the dream touches down — not where it should be but where he is.”

No sooner does he behold the vision, then he discovers the Lord beholding it too, standing beside him making promises — nine of them in all: ‘I am with you...I will give you... I will not leave you... I have promised you.’”⁴ “One would have expected God had something a little more just in mind for the little cheat, a taste of divine wrath, perhaps, a dose of Jacob’s own medicine for a change, some good-old ‘chewing-you-out’ words, for starters. But this unbelievably beautiful dream was what Jacob got, not to mention the God who went with it.”⁵ “God holds nothing back, tucking everything but money into the pocket of this thief.”⁶

“When Jacob wakes, he is still a double-crosser and a deceiver, but he is also God’s chosen one, a visionary who does not mistake what he has seen. ‘How awesome is this place!’ he declares to the high, thin air. ‘This in none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ He does not deserve the dream but he needs it, and what is more, he believes it. When he awakes, he does not write the whole thing off to anxiety or indigestion. He accepts it as God’s gift to him — a true thing that happened to him in a reality lodged somewhere between this world and another, a true vision of the ladder connecting the two in the middle of nowhere.”⁷ He leaves a marker, vows to return and makes his own promise to God that sounds a bit more like negotiations than unconditional allegiance.

If you’re looking for an easy moral to the story, forget it. “What there is instead is the remarkable tale of the God who insisted on sticking with the likes of people like Jacob and his brood down through all the dark days their lives would take them and the crooked paths they would insist on taking to get wherever they got. Did Jacob every really

appreciate the kind of generosity and goodness the Lord has shown him? Enough to mend his ways, have a change of heart?" That can be debated. But [I suppose the judgement is] "still out on whether people like you and me have ever fully appreciated what [the Lord] has been doing for us, going with us every step of the way, and promising never to leave us.... For the message of the Gospel is that that is precisely what God has been doing all along, what he did most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, and has been doing ever since for a world, for a church and for people like you and me who, most days, cannot think of much better to say in response than,"⁸ our own version of Jacob's vow, "IF you do this, Lord, *then* I'll believe." Still God does not give up, reject or send hurricane, fires or falling buildings to punish us. God loves and will not ever take it back.

But there is another part of Jacob's experience we need to notice and that is the dream. Taylor writes,

"We have been schooled in science and philosophy; we have learned to trust what we can handle and prove. We have been taught to think, not to dream and we have lived long enough to watch many of our dreams die hard. Only saints and children still believe their dreams will come true. The rest of us are adults... [let] Our dreams rise to our lips and we tamp down again."⁹

But there is a huge difference between our human dreams and God's dreams. The vision God gave Jacob DID come true. It took quite a while for Jacob's descendants to finally be an independent nation, but it happened. God comes to earth in dreams that spark our imagination and make our hearts swell, and usually with a bit of trembling, too. Be aware that God's dreams *may* come to us in our sleep, but they can also come when we are wide awake. Listen to Jesus and you will be drawn into God's vision of the world and its people, healed, whole and joy-filled. As God's children, we must not forget to dream. Or, more correctly, we must not forget to allow God's dreams to come to us in the night and day, in the Word and the Meal, in fellowship and service. God will send them to us — deserving or not. Because, like Jacob, "we are dreamers of the promise, set apart to bless all the families of the earth...[like Jacob, God's dream often] comes when we have run out of the

things we can get for ourselves. It comes when all our conniving has blown up in our faces and our luck has run out” and we are empty of our own quick fixes and boxed-up programs.

God is faithful and steadfast. God IS with us, the saints and sinners we are. God is determined to make the dream Jesus called the Kingdom of God come true through the likes of us. Go figure. Or better yet, go dream of who we can be and what we can do when we let **God’s dreams** inspire, fill and lead us. There are so many — at home or on the run – who need to know that God is with them wherever they are, ready with comfort, strength and purpose. That is the truth and that is no dream. That is the stuff of Jesus and being his disciple — a life well lived, rich and meaningful beyond our wildest dreams.

Amen

Linda M Alessandri 9/23/17

ENDNOTES

1. Barry J. Robinson, “Grace” as posted on his site, “Keeping the Faith in Babylon” at www.spirit-net.ca

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Dreaming the Truth,” Gospel Medicine (Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 101

3. Barry J. Robinson, “Grace” as posted on his site, “Keeping the Faith in Babylon” at www.spirit-net.ca

4. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Dreaming the Truth,” Gospel Medicine (Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 102

5. Barry J. Robinson, “Grace” as posted on his site, “Keeping the Faith in Babylon” at www.spirit-net.ca

6. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Dreaming the Truth,” Gospel Medicine (Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 102

7. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Dreaming the Truth," Gospel Medicine (Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 102

8. Barry J. Robinson, "Grace" as posted on his site, "Keeping the Faith in Babylon" at www.spiritnet.ca

9. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Dreaming the Truth," Gospel Medicine (Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 105