

Jacob's Ladder

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How many of you are active dreamers? You go to sleep and when you wake up, you get to remember something pleasant, or maybe unpleasant, from the night before? (*Show of Hands?*) I myself *am* an active dreamer. I have remembered dreams my whole life. Sometimes they are funny, sometimes scary. Earlier this week, I dreamed that all the instruments and equipment in our music room had been stolen. And they had been stolen because I left the door unlocked and open all day. So, something is making me anxious! Several times a year, I have a dream that I am in a math class that I have not attended all semester and it's time to take a final – and I am panicked. A memorable dream I had many years ago is that I walked outside and a parade was going by, and the parade was there just for me. I love to remember my dreams – the good, the bad, and the embarrassing – and discover what they are telling me about my life. But sometimes I wake up, and I've had a Big Dream – more showing up to school without any clothes on, a dream where God is telling me something that I may not be able to understand in any other way. Dreams can be, sometimes, gateways that let us see a little bit of the work of the soul.

If you don't remember your dreams, that is no worry – I said that they are *one* way (not the *only* way) for us to be in touch the heavenly realm.

In our story today from Genesis, Jacob has a big life dream. But before we get there, let me set the stage of this story: two twins born, struggling even in the womb. Their parents: Isaac, the man without a lot to say, and Rebekah, the strong willed and determined mother. The twins: Esau, a hunter and Jacob, his tricky and calculating brother, the younger twin. Even though God had promised the land where they lived to their grandfather, Abraham, the family was still nomadic – wandering around from place to place. They had not yet settled. So when Jacob, the trickster and cunning character that he is, steals Esau's birthright from him, his mother thinks it might be wise to send him away for a little while. Ostensibly he is returning back to Haran to find a bride from his mother's people – and he is also running away from the justifiable anger of his brother, Esau. Here we find Jacob fleeing from Beer-sheba to Haran, a distance of 634 miles. Jacob is at least 40 years old, and until this point in time was a mama's boy – and not the sweet kind. The kind of mama's boy where she did everything for him – dressed him, fed him – and it was a little creepy. In fact, he was such an underdeveloped adult that he didn't even pack a bag correctly for his trip, so he had to use a stone for a pillow when he went to sleep.

And then Jacob has this dream.

When Jacob laid his head down that night, I imagine the dreams he might have had – maybe an anxiety dream about running away but never getting to your destination. Or a nightmare about a lion with his brother's face finding him and eating him. Or maybe a dream where he escaped back to his unhealthy relationship with Rebekah. But that's not

the dream he had. He dreamed of a *sulam* that was so big, it reached from the earth up to the heavens. And angels were descending and ascending on it, up and down. This word *sulam* we usually translate as ladder – but more on that in a minute. And God’s own self was right there beside Jacob and told this man that the promise still stands – his descendants would be numerous as the grains of sand. When Jacob awoke from his stone pillow, he names the place where he had this dream as a holy one. He says, “Surely God is in this place – and I didn’t know it!” – and this is not an exaggeration. This story was written with an iron age mentality – for ancient people, God was not omnipresent, and God could no more be in more than one place than either you or I. So in this dream, God has come with Jacob, not stayed with his brother and parents. Jacob wakes up and he *names* this place where he had a sacred dream. At first, he calls the place “the house of God” and “the gate of heaven.”

In a Big Life Dream like this, we usually have one symbol or feeling that towers over the others. In this dream, it’s the *sulam*, or ladder. This word appears only once in the Hebrew Bible – right here. Which means that it is hard to translate. It might be a ladder, or a staircase, perhaps resembling the gigantic ziggurat structures that we find in ancient Mesopotamia. One likely explanation that I’ve read in my research on this topic is that the *sulam* is actually a gate, but a gate that does not swing outward but instead it rises and closes vertically. Whatever the *sulam* is, it connects the heavens to the earth.

But there’s a big difference between a ladder and a gate. So let’s think about that for a few minutes. A ladder has rungs that you have to climb. In the spiritual life, every rung has a different name on it. In the ladders in our lives, what are the rungs? Maybe one rung is a prayer life. Maybe another is becoming more Christ like. Maybe one is standing up to injustice. Maybe another is being instead of doing. Or letting go of those habits that stand between us and God.

Ladders also help us reach higher out of the circumstances where we find ourselves. In the American South, enslaved people sang the song “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder”. The ladder imagery was powerful for the enslaved who saw a ladder as a way to climb higher and higher, away from the injustices that they lived. The ladder called on enslaved people to fight back against their own enslavement – that’s why the song says ‘soldiers of the cross’ over and over. They are not to be passive recipients of injustice but to fight this evil in profound ways. This was also one of the first spirituals that white people began to sing.

In Jacob’s dream, God reiterates the promise made to Jacob’s family. He reminds him that the land was promised to his ancestors and that his descendants will be numerous as the dust of the earth. Jacob is not really the ideal candidate here – he’s a grown man whose mother still dresses him, on the run from his brother whom he’s just tricked out of his family legacy. The man doesn’t even know to bring something to use for a pillow on this long trip. Esau is really the better candidate for the family legacy. And I have to admit, as the “good kid” in the family, I got pretty tired of all the examples in the Bible of the unlikely kid getting all the promises and rewards. But this story isn’t about what we *deserve* – it’s about who we can become.

Last week Joe told us, in his very first sermon here at FCC, about Nameless – someone who traveled from the West to Texas and back again, with acts of grace happening all around. Did Nameless deserve grace? Not more than any of us. But I thank God that Nameless accepted God’s grace even in the most unlikely of places.

A friend of mine from college was exactly what your parents warned you about before you went there. She was a free spirit, to say the least. Every picture of her from our first semester in college shows her with glassy eyes because she was usually on some drug – she could get by, but just barely. We were in a program together that was for people exploring faith development and church. She loved the program, but she was one overdose away from death. The director of our program was supportive but a tough love kind of woman. She told my friend to get sober or she’d be kicked out – and she did get sober. It was a tough first year detoxing and staying clean, but she has been clean now for over twenty years. The next rung on her ladder twenty-one years ago seemed really far away and unreachable, but she climbed it. Our program director literally opened those gates of heaven for my friend so that she would even have a ladder to climb.

A woman I know, a friend and a leader in churches in Northern California, was 25 years ago living on the streets. She struggled with addiction. She was on the verge of not surviving. She was in relationships that were not healthy. I don’t know all the details of these years. But I do know that people extended kindness to her once in a while; kindness that did not have strings attached or judgment in their eyes. She did become sober, and eventually had a young child, she got stable and into training and a work environment. A kind couple took her under their wing and provided a little safety net of support when she needed it the most. Eventually she started going to a Disciples church. And then she found herself at the women’s Fall Retreat, and she saw the light of women all around her. People were on the stage leading worship and talking about the questions they saw in Scripture. She told me, “Katy, I just *had* to know what those women were doing. I got a council so I could learn from them.” A valuable lesson she had learned in her anonymous groups was that you follow people who are successful – do what they’re doing. So she became a member of the women’s council. After a few years, she began to consider ordained ministry. What is the next rung on her ladder? I don’t know. But I guarantee you that twenty-five years ago, she couldn’t see the rung that said “Disciples Women’s Council of Northern California-Nevada” on it. Sometimes we get a little sneak peak at the what is behind the gate of heaven, and she got that at several moments in her life so that she could climb her own ladder.

This is why we have times when we dream. Jacob, sleeping on his rock for a pillow could have no way of knowing that he would one day be the father of the 12 tribes of Israel; of the heartaches he would experience; his joys; his eventual reconciliation with his brother; his own journey and death in Egypt. His legacy doesn’t stop there – those sons would become the Israelites with all their hardships and triumphs. Jacob becomes a central figure for Christians as well. Those rungs were way, way too high up on the ladder for him to see the night he laid down with a stone for his pillow. So this dream he had was a shortcut to show him where he was about to climb.

So, FCC Chico, we are called not only as individuals but as a church body to climb Jacob's ladder. Yesterday I officiated the funeral service of Floyd English in the Chico Cemetery. Floyd helped build this church literally, and a woman present told me that she had learned Jesus loves me with Floyd in the old Hazel street building. Did Floyd know the legacy of FCC Chico back then? I can't imagine that he'd see that in 2016 and 2017 we would host Trans Awareness Week and make a difference in the lives of people who are marginalized at so many sectors in society. Or that we would resurrect VBS for the second year in a row, inviting children into our church and hearts. We can't see the rungs on the ladder – but it matters that we keep climbing up.

But remember what I said earlier – the *sulam* may be a ladder. But it may be a gate, a gate that rises vertically. If this is the case, it's a HUGE GATE because it still extends from the earth to the heaven. And the angels still ascend and descend on it. But let me ask you – what is easier? To climb a ladder or walk through a gate? The gate is *much* easier, right? Maybe this symbol can be both – because in dreams, things hardly ever mean just one thing. The dream is like the gateway to heaven, where Jacob gets to see a little glimpse of what is to come. Of course, when Jacob wakes up, he still has to do the hard work – find his way to Haran, struggle with his father in law, reconcile with his brother. There's no free pass, and he can't skip a rung to get to his destination. But when he goes to sleep, that ladder can transform into an instant gate.

Dr. Bill Such challenged us two weeks ago to take our faith to the streets. Joe last week let us know about the Nameless people all around us. You've got a ladder to climb. As a church, we will be climbing the rungs that God puts in our path. But what we are doing is opening the gates of heaven for the people around us when they need it the most.