

*Awakening to Our Dreams*  
Pentecost 7A  
PPC  
19 July 2020

Psalm 139  
Genesis 27: 46-28:5, 10-19a

There's a new/old word being used today to describe a person who is clued in to the realities of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Are you a "woke" person? Have your eyes been opened, or maybe even more, has your heart been opened to the pain and injustice that lives on in our daily lives. Many of us who grew up in white communities assumed that the life we experienced in the '50's was typical of other children's lives at the time.

I remember having a discussion in a Women's History course in seminary about feminism and the suffragette movement. For those of us who had been educated in the white school systems of Monroe County, our assumptions were that all the women who were contemporaries of Susan B. Anthony had been involved in the movement. Our grandmothers had been there when women were first allowed to vote. When the Blacks in the class spoke up and said their experiences were not in line with what we thought was common, my eyes were opened. I had to listen. Their mothers and grandmothers had been too busy taking care of children, often not their own, working hard and hadn't realized they could vote. It turns out there were two different tracks on the women's suffrage movement line. White and Black women did not follow the same path. In the south, particularly, obstacles were built to keep Black women and men from voting, period.

This is what it means to be "woke." It is your "Aha" moment when you realize that not everyone was living the same life you were. In order to be able to come to

terms with this idea, it takes the hard work of looking inward. This is what Jung means as he writes “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart.” Sure, you can be informed of the different stories that exist in history but until you can reconcile those unknown stories to what you know, you will not be “woke.”

As we learned last week, Jacob is the family trickster. Maybe when he was four everyone laughed and thought he was cute but as an adult his cuteness is not so apparent. Although he repeatedly gets into trouble, he still evokes maternal devotion. At this point in the story of this troubled family, he has swindled a birthright from Esau for a bowl of soup and now he has tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing of the firstborn. As a result, half of this family doesn’t like him very much. In fact, Esau, his twin but also the firstborn, is plotting to kill him. Tempers are flaring in the old homestead. Mom, gotta love Mom, keeps her cool and comes up with a plan that will keep Jacob from the wrath of his father and brother. She will send him away for “a while.”

There’s a great line in the movie, *My Big, Fat Greek Wedding*, that goes “the man is the head but the woman is the neck.” Rebekah, acting as the neck, turns Isaac’s head in another direction and convinces him that since the birthright blessing he gave Jacob can’t be undone, the best course of action now is to secure the family line and that means getting Jacob a wife. Not one of these dreadful Hittite girls like his brother, Esau, brought home, though. No, Jacob must have a Canaanite woman - one from the Promised Land. And what better place to find a wife for the heir of the family fortune than at Rebekah’s former homestead, now run by her brother, Laban.

In response to his wife's "suggestion," Isaac meets with Jacob and gives his cheating heir one final blessing. Surprisingly, this is not a blessing given bitterly or with resentment. It is a heartfelt blessing given in the spirit of love. Isaac still has that dream of a perfect family and so, in this departure, his blessing and charge are given freely to Jacob. In this blessing the promise is handed down to another generation. God will be with Jacob and this family and nation, Israel.

And so, Jacob sets out. When night falls, he finds himself in the middle of the wilderness with no shelter. Taking some stones, he places them around his head for protection, lies down to sleep and has a dream.

What a dream! He dreams of a ladder, or a ramp, or a stairway, or *something* that connects earth to heaven. I picture a big Busby Berkley movie - women in evening dresses, men in dinner jackets and top hats - lining the stairway to heaven, singing and dancing as they move up and down the staircase while a large orchestra plays. In the middle of this huge extravaganza, with music playing, couples dancing, spotlights shining and disco balls spinning - GOD appears! The Hebrew is unclear as to whether God is standing over the staircase or over Jacob but it really doesn't matter. The boss has showed up and now some important information will be shared.

Isn't it interesting that up to this point in the narrative, Jacob hasn't really bought into all of this "God stuff." He calls God "*your* God" when talking earlier to Isaac. No wonder, then, that God begins his oracle with the words, "Jacob, I am your God." God proceeds to make all the promises to Jacob that were given to his grandfather, Abraham, and to his father, Isaac. For the third time and for the third generation, God repeats the blessing of the covenant.

I imagine this surely had to have made Jacob's eyes pop. WOW! Maybe God *is* real and God *is* in this place. I had no idea! What a "woke" moment this must have been for our trickster, Jacob. The Hebrew word used to describe Jacob at this moment translates literally into he was "over-awed." "How awesome is this place," cries out Jacob. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So, the next morning upon awakening, he takes the rocks he had been sleeping on and erects a pillar, or signpost, or cairn, in the wilderness and pours oil on top of it to mark the place where he encountered the Divine. This is a holy place.

Or at least for the moment. As much as we might hope that this encounter and this dream will change the trickster, Jacob forever; as much as we would like to imagine that an encounter with the Divine might leave us radically altered; as much as we would like to think all of this, the story now takes an all too human turn.

Jacob did awaken the morning after a profoundly meaningful and hopeful dream feeling elated. He has had a dream that has made such a deep impact that he wakes up convinced that he has, for the first time, met God and that God is real. This dream lasts for the morning, though, and the next thing we know, Jacob, like Scarlett O'Hara, puts his fist to the sky and makes this vow: "IF God will indeed be with me and IF God will protect me on this journey, and IF God will provide me with food...and clothing... (Lemme think, is there anything else I want?)...oh, yeah, and IF I get back to my father's house in one piece, THEN the Lord will be my God."

WOW! Jacob isn't denying the existence of God, that's clear, but he surely isn't ready to jump into this God thing with both feet. Jacob wants to set up security

measures for himself. IF God delivers, THEN Jacob will respond by letting God be *his* God.

Jacob had a dream. When he woke up, he had to decide what to do with that dream, just as we do. He had the opportunity to interpret that dream in any way he wanted. We are looking at his dream as outsiders and we can put our own spin on it and make it what we want it to be, too. Maybe the ladder does represent our journey toward spiritual perfection and every rung is another step of the journey. Or, maybe the ladder with God at the top and the angels going up and down it represents the times when we feel closer and then farther away from God. Or, maybe the angels are being sent to do God's work on earth. All of these are valid interpretations.

The real question, though, is after a dream or an encounter with God, what actions are we going to take when we are awake? Personally, I have never had such an obvious encounter with the divine. Some of you may have. But, sometimes in the moment of deep connection with an other, or the view of a spectacular sunset, or walking the beach as the roar of the waves fills my ears, an "aha" moment occurs. For a brief, fleeting, moment, I know something deep. For a moment I feel at one with the universe. Afterwards, however, I am left with the understanding that what God is saying to me is filtered through my own personality. We all put filters of our own experience, our own knowledge, our own belief system...our doubts, our fears, our hopes, and our childhoods into the insights we have. What comes out at the other end, our actions, are always going to come up short of where we "should be." This is where Jacob stands as an example for us. What Jacob felt and interpreted through his dream became a factor in how he responded to the divine. In an all too real reaction, we can

see that his dream didn't immediately send him in a direction of repentance. He was telling God what he wanted.

Do you have dreams? Do you long for the world to reflect the love that God has for all creation? Do we want our children to respect diversity and love the stranger in our midst? How will we treat each other? What does it mean when God appears and says to you, "I am your God?" How do we receive that message? Do you believe that God is actually working among us now, that God's work will be accomplished by those of us who claim membership in this church at the corner of Hope and Mt. Hope, here in Providence, RI?

I don't think Jacob actually came to terms of what it meant to him to know that God was his God until much later in his life. Most of the people of the biblical stories face danger, hardship, tragedy, and fear. Those are the places most often where God shows up. God is close to the poor not because there's anything holy about poverty, but because people in poverty face such worries constantly. That's what brings them face to face with God.

The Church, with a capital "C" is facing danger and we are afraid. Everything about how we used to do things is disappearing. This pandemic has changed our business as usual. Like the country around us, we, too, must look at the ways that for too long we have held onto. We have been a stronghold of white privilege. Is church about something more than a tidy Sunday morning worship complete with excellent music? As Amy Butler stated in a recent blog, "the church has been in a steady, spiral of descent."

Those who came before us were doing the best they could with what they knew then. Their dreams are an important part of the fabric of this church. We don't need to forget those dreams or set them aside. We do need to gather them up and carry them with us as we go into an unknown future. We are followers of Jesus. We, who listen to his teachings, come to understand that as Christians we must do more than continue to do what we've always done.

What are we going to do with our dreams? Not all of us can see the same vision right now. Can we all agree, though, that we do need a new vision?

Our country lost two icons of the Civil Rights Movement this past week. Rev. C.T. Vivian and John Lewis have gone on to join that great cloud of witnesses that is always with us. In his tribute to John Lewis, President Obama wrote, "America is a constant work of progress. What gives each new generation purpose is to take up the unfinished work of the last and carry it further - to speak out for what's right, to challenge an unjust status quo, and to imagine a better world." John Lewis leaves us with these words: "Never let anyone - any person or any force - dampen, dim or diminish your light."

If these aren't invitations to put our dreams into action, I don't know what is.

God, speaking through Isaiah, says "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not see it?" (Isaiah 43:19).

Christ brought new meaning to the nation Israel. His crucifixion and resurrection showed us that in the end, love always wins. God is at work - always. Even in the midst of the unimaginable.

In the midst of our fear and our anguish and our depression, we must remember this. Our faith that is being sorely tested right now is a faith that our God will create something new. Together, following on the path that Jesus calls us to be on, we can overcome.

That old spiritual keeps ringing in my ears, “Keep your hands on the plow, hold on.”

AMEN.