

“DREAMS ARE THE STUFF WE ARE MADE OF”

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If you're a *Mad Man* fan, know that the last season begins Easter evening. It's something how dynamically dreams drive that television series: dreams as in the American dream, and how dreamy promises pitch their products. They don't sell Clearasil the purity of youth, blemish free. They don't sell Popsicles but sharing. Take, break and eat them, Peggy pitches, revisiting her fading Catholic youth. It's also striking how the lofty dreams they pitch starkly contrast with the ragged and tattered dreams of their personal lives. Implicitly, they know whoever owns our dreams will also own our lives. And that is as true in the Bible as in *Mad Men*.

As we turn to Jacob's dream, we seek leverage on our dreams. You recall Jacob. His name, in Hebrew means "heel" or "grabber". That refers to Jacob's birth, right on the *heels* of twin brother Esau. He as grasped after his brother even in the birth canal. So Jacob isn't nicknamed grabber for nothing. With his poor, old dad Isaac blind on his deathbed, Jacob dresses up in sheep's clothing and fools Isaac into blessing him with the family inheritance. He works every angle to grab what is brother Esau's. Duping Esau out of his birthright is only his first scheme.

Jacob makes his shady way through the world, by hook or crook. He never feels so pumped as when he puts one over on poor, thick, slow Esau. "Pick a card, Esau, any card!" How does Esau feel about this? After father Isaac's funeral, he resolves to skewer his conniving brother like one of the wild beasts he loved to hunt and roast over an open fire. Esau vows Jacob will pay for what he's done.

Slipping out of the funeral home backdoor during the last verse of "The Old Rugged Cross", Jacob high tails it out of town before Esau can spring his trap. With that hasty exit, Jacob has gone from rip-off artist to fugitive. He is in exile. He is now on the run. His master plan to inherit the old man's estate, to supplant his brother's inheritance, to "have it all"—remember that mantra from the 80's?—now doesn't seem so masterful. Look at Jacob, sleeping in the wilderness like a wild animal, without family or friends or support. That's like finding yourself alone and broken down at night, lost somewhere in the Jersey swamps. Jacob is lost.

Alone, vulnerable, fleeing, that's where today's story from Genesis takes up. It is nighttime in a wilderness known for savage beasts. Jacob beds down with no more than a flat stone for a pillow. It didn't bode well for a quiet night's sleep. The sleep of fugitives is always restless. Lonely, exposed, between nowhere and no place—we've all know that desolate place, even if we've never been fugitives.

Maybe Jacob is no longer feeling so clever about his consuming acquisitiveness. Maybe being reduced to bare survival has taken some starch out of his endless scheming. Maybe for a moment he is no longer so obsessively on the take. May-

be he wants nothing so much as a new identity beyond grabbing and grasping. This much is sure. When our defenses are down and we find ourselves in crisis, we're most suggestible to the possibility of real transformation. Insecure, alone in a strange place, Jacob tosses and turns. He dreams deeply. What a dream it is.

You know this dream. No, not the one where we show up at school, the only one dressed in underwear. No, not the one where we're surprised to learn we must take a test and have only ten minutes to prepare. It's the Jacob's ladder dream.

The psychoanalysts, now out of fashion, claimed that our dreams recall and work through painful and unsettled events within our past. They churn up from our unconscious as we sleep to process unresolved inner tensions. If that were true of Jacob, his dream life would be a triple feature: the Sting, part one, two and three.

If Jacob saw a therapist today, his diagnosis might be narcissist or sociopath. It's all about Jacob. Zero guilt over bamboozling his naive brother or blind father. So God didn't give Jacob the usual dreams to work through stuff. Instead God gave him a Technicolor dream extravaganza of heaven and earth. A stairway descends from heavenly reaches. Angels silently ascend and descend that staircase. It symbolizes our prayers sent up to God and God's revelations sent down our way. But God's angel messengers are silent as God offers Jacob a new deal.

That these angels both ascend and descend as God calls Jacob to a new life is vital to the story. It indicates that God is not remote and impervious above. God traffics with our likes. God can even extend his promises to all humanity through the likes of Jacob. That one so consumed in selfishness as Jacob can get a new start is a miracle; that Jacob bore this promise for all humankind is unfathomable.

Jacob's dream uncannily informs our modern dreams. Did you ever noticed that our dreams, at least our waking dreams, are mostly a one-way staircase to heaven? What I mean is we think we know what we want and what we need. And the task of prayer is to persuade God. Frankly, a lot of our dreams, pardon me for saying so, are selfish. Many of the dreams we hear are grasping and acquisitive, about personal status and comfort, wrapped in brands from Nike to Neiman Marcus. Mad Men narrates how dreams are bought and sold in America like no where else. Flip through the ads in a glossy magazine or catalogue. We see not so much products sold as dreams being peddled. But whose dreams are they?

Jacob's dream had always been to own and run the family business and have big dumb Esau waxing his Bentley. Jacob had mindlessly pursued that dream since before he was born. "God make me, God give me, God grant me, God get me," he told the angels headed up that staircase. His dream is consuming. His is a dream that pits winners against losers and haves at the expense of have-nots.

I'm not preaching today against goods or things. Jesus said our heavenly Father knows we need specific things and certainly to pray for them. I am not preaching

against accomplishment or prosperity today. John Wesley once said make as much as you can, save as much as you can, and give away as much as you can. I *am* preaching against how individualistic and selfish our dreams can become, how acquisitive and narcissistic dreams get systematically lifted from every side.

Fortunately, God traffics both ways between heaven and earth. That means, yes, God hears our dreams, our hopes, our aspirations. He grants parts of our dream, never all of it, for we aren't the only dreamers. God also has a dream, one bigger than ours. It's not only for Jacob and his heirs but for all families of the earth. God's dream is so expansive, so all-embracing, it will always trump any human dream. God's dream is what Jesus described by the kingdom or reign of God. If nothing else today, we learn that God has a glowing and universal dream greater than the self-preening dreams of our own personal success, power, and status.

Alright, so it's not like Jacob hears an altar call and promises to live blamelessly forever. But after he awakens, Jacob does say in effect, "Ok God, if you feed me, clothe me, shelter me, and give me land, then I will let you be my God. And I will stop acting like a god unto myself." Would you trust this guy if you were God? It's like, "All right God, take a card, any card." But the amazing thing is that God not only trusted Jacob the schemer and con-artist. But that God chose and called Jacob, just as God would later call Moses the murderer and David the adulterer.

Dreams are funny, aren't they? They can seem non-sensical and so absurd we are embarrassed to admit to them. They have the power to define and direct us. Sometimes our dreams are as pedestrian as Jacob's, trying to make a big splash stomping the puddles of this lifetime. Other times our dreams are so soaring and majestic and right that God's angels must have surely implanted them within us.

In her book *The Dream of God*, Verna Dozier says, "Jesus came to serve the world, to restore it to the oneness with God from which it had fallen. That restoration is always the mission of God's people. Any talk about ministry that does not talk about (restoration) has already missed the mark. Ministry is serving the world God loves. God's people are sent to love the world—the people of the world, not the kingdoms of the world, not the way of life that exalts one over another, greed over giving, power over vulnerability, worldly kingdoms over the kingdom of God...We are a chosen people, chosen for God's high purposes, that God's dream for a new creation may be realized. God has paid us the high compliment of calling us as coworkers, a compliment so awesome that we've fled from it and taken refuge from it...Like Esau, we have surrendered our birthright."

As your dreams feel spent--and all our dreams fall exhausted--remember God's dream. As your pillow feels like a stone fearing whether you'll get and have enough, remember God's dream. Renewed with God's dream, wake refreshed from your sleep, knowing God will keep us and bring us home. And say with Jacob, "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place, and I didn't know it." Amen.

God of the day and of the night, whose presence surrounds us, whose home is everywhere, whose human family embraces every last one of us, there is no nook to hide where we're beyond the reach of your love. The gateway to heaven is wherever we are in the moment as we turn back to you, preferring your will and your way over our own. You whisper promise and hope within our dreams. Your dream brackets our dreams, sorting out the worthy and noble from the fraudulent and self-seeking. In sleep or in wakefulness, you whisper through your angels, "Come along, take my hand, we have work to do." Lord, speak to us. For you are continually with us. Strengthen us to hear your call and to respond to your vision.