

Dreams, God's Promises, and Our Worship

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, as we turn our hearts now to think through your word, we ask that your Holy Spirit will think through our hearts and minds and bring us to the place of worship.

In Christ's name, amen. You will see this great abundance of candles up here, and they are marking the time down.

I mean, I don't know how they mark it, but they're leading towards the mission. When all the candles are alight, the mission will be upon us. And I am just very impressed by the extent that this mission belongs to all of us in a very special way.

I wonder if, yes, in your prayers this morning, you have recognized the mission you are on this morning and that you need to fulfill in relationship to other people here in the congregation.

In making them welcome. In hearing them. In some way embracing them.

[1 : 34] And knowing who they are. A congregation full of people waiting for someone to speak to them is probably a usual Sunday morning activity.

We will be thinking about the mission you have to one another. And the preparation for the mission that we're having together as a congregation. And we need people who will be counselors and people who will be readers and people who will be producers and directors and people who will serve meals and coffee and people who will play instruments and people who will open their homes for hospitality.

We need all those things. There's an ad in the bulletin that we have for dramatism. That seems a somewhat overdramatic way of saying it. But we do need some help in trying to put on some short sort of skits, I suppose, that demonstrate something of the truth of the gospel.

So all these people. So I want you to be thinking and praying about what your ministry in the congregation as a whole is and perhaps to seek to focus it in the ministry you have in our mission together.

I want you to remind you that Kathy Nichols Bible study starts on Wednesday and that the sermon this morning is on that there is a Bible study which you can use in preparation for next week's sermon that's been published.

[3 : 11] And you can use it in your group and it's available after the sermon. Now I want you to look at Genesis 28 and the passage which was read for the Old Testament lesson this morning.

And it's on page 24 in your few Bibles. And it begins with verse 10. Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran.

I think that my early theological training came as a result of discussing at length with my father who was a lawyer why any religion should be founded on a character like Jacob.

Any religion to which Jacob was acceptable was not acceptable to him. And I gather most of the Bible studies who have looked at Jacob this week may feel much the same way.

I have prepared a short poem to cover the subject saying, and this is the poem which I myself have written, God has spent most of history trying to make up for having made the choice of Jacob.

[4 : 40] And you may not understand the depth of that poem until you begin to see the character of this man evolve. But somewhere in a sense in the dawn of history, the struggle which we're reading about this morning is the struggle that took place between this man and God.

We may not consider God to have been very wise to have chosen such a man. But God's purpose was firmly in mind, and God chose to use even such a person to fulfill that purpose.

And let me remind you that he might do the same with you. That is, your character might not measure up to what you think is required of those who would serve the purpose of God.

But God, in spite of that, might choose to use you in fulfillment of his purpose, in spite of who you are. In fact, you might get to the point where you thank God that he does that.

The story in the passage tells about what Jacob calls his day of distress, and that the God who met him in his day of distress has been with him ever since.

[6 : 07] You read that in Genesis 35. On that day of distress, Jacob was fleeing from the wrath of Esau, his brother.

He was fleeing from his home. He was heading back to the land from which his grandfather Abraham had come out. And as he traveled, he came to this spot at Bethel.

And there, in a night that wasn't diluted by any electricity, in the pure darkness of the night, with nothing but the panorama of the night sky over him, he selected a stone as a pillow, and he lay down, not having said his prayers.

But, as you may have discovered, and I have often discovered, even when you go to bed without saying your prayers, you spend many nights being wakened up to say them between three and four in the morning, and it's a very unhappy business.

And, uh, very often. It would be better if you had said them before you went to bed. And, uh, God wakes Jacob, or doesn't wake him, but confronts him in a dream in the middle of the night.

[7 : 34] The dream is full of promises. Promises which God has for many, but which he makes to one. Promises which lead Jacob to worship.

There is a dream. In the dream, there are promises, and in those promises, Jacob is compelled to worship. And my, the thing I want to tell you this morning is that I think the three essential ingredients of our lives are first that we should have a dream.

God uses dreams to convey a reality which our conscious minds could never put together. Just think, how does God break through to you who've never turned the radio off between six in the morning and midnight in your life?

Who have only turned it off on such occasions as you want to watch television? Who are so caught up in the business of driving your car down the highway that your mind is totally focused on where you are and what you're doing?

Who is so enmeshed emotionally with the people around you that you never have a chance to think beyond the immediacy of those irritating personal relationships and the problems they engender in your life?

[9 : 04] How is God to break through and speak to you? How could it possibly happen when there is not a moment of silence? There is not a moment of quiet.

There is not a moment of freedom from the constant hammer of the distraction to which we are subject in the modern world. How can you break through? In the same way, how could God break through to Jacob in the manner of his life?

Perhaps in his illiteracy. Perhaps in his constant scheming mind. Perhaps how could God break through and how can God break through to you?

There must be a dream. God invaded the subconscious of Solomon to find out what he really wanted. And in a dream, he communicated with Solomon.

And in a dream, he communicated with Joseph. And within a dream, he communicated with Nebuchadnezzar. And the list in the Bible could go on and on.

[10 : 12] Speaking of the way that God communicates with us in dreams. But you want to see something that I think is really quite startling. And that is that those dreams consistently portrayed to the dreamer a reality which they otherwise did not know.

A reality which did not exist anywhere else in their lives. Nebuchadnezzar could never have seen the whole panorama of history stretching out before him.

Joseph, the younger brother, could never have seen how God was going to use his life. Solomon could never have seen the thing which was of supreme value to God in his life without that dream.

That dream has to be there. You have to have it. You can't live apart from that dream. Now, I'm not suggesting that you go to your psychiatrist and ask him about Carl Jung.

But what I'm wanting to tell you is that somehow God has to break into our world to introduce us to a reality which otherwise we wouldn't know.

[11 : 31] we simply wouldn't be aware of it. And that's how God did it for Jacob. A great Scottish preacher has excused Jacob for having a dream by saying that he didn't have a hymn book and he didn't have a Bible and he didn't have a copy of Pilgrim's Progress so God had to speak to him through a dream.

Well, God probably does speak to us through worship, through Pilgrim's Progress, through the New Testament, through the Holy Spirit.

But what he does is to bring us face to face with a reality which otherwise we could not know. God must break into our lives.

Harry Blumeyers, who preached here not many weeks ago, in one of his novels says, the supreme superstition of this 20th century is to conceive of the real as less than the finite.

We are finite creatures living in a finite world and we say that's reality. That isn't reality. There is a reality that is infinitely greater than that.

[12:57] And God help us if there is no point in our lives where we are widely in touch with that reality. The reality of heaven and hell.

The reality of redemption and forgiveness. The reality of the kingdom of God. That's the reality. And the finite circumstances of our lives are passing away.

We have a God who is virtually exploding to make himself known to us. We are locked up in our own little finite world in which we can't conceive of anything beyond the limits of touch and taste and sight and hearing.

yet there is no reality in the insubstantial nature of those things. So we need a dream representing God breaking through to us and introducing us to another kind of reality.

Martin Luther King said, you know, very memorable words of the 20th century that ring down through, I had a dream.

[14:16] You must be able to say that too because that's the focus of the reality of your life. Second thing that God gave to Jacob was promises.

And those promises are the basis on which Jacob lived his life. Read the passage. See the promises. There they are, all set out for you.

The land on which you lie, I will give you. Your descendants shall be like the dust. Irritating.

That's just one picture. They shall be like the stars in the heaven without number. They shall be like the sand by the seaside. They shall be like the dust.

And this is the promise that God gave to Abraham, the promise that God gave to Isaac and the promise that God gave to Jacob. And he said, and you will spread to the north and to the south and to the east and the west.

[15:29] And I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you back to this land. And I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.

These are the very promises on which the people of God have lived by faith through countless centuries and on which your life must be based.

Having been given a dream, you are sustained by the promises of God and claiming those promises for us as a congregation, for you as an individual, as the head of your family, for you as a wanderer and fugitive on the face of the earth.

Whatever your circumstance must be, your relationship to God is that of identifying and claiming these promises. And these promises ring all the way through the scriptures, wherever the people of God are in prosperity or adversity.

No matter what circumstance of history they have come to, the promises keep coming through. The land on which I lie, I will, you lie, I will give you.

[16:43] Your descendants shall be like the ducks. You will spread to the north, the south, and the east, and the west. I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. These promises keep coming and you need to grab them and hold on to them because they are meant for you.

And these are only, there's a million different ways in which God has expressed these promises and locked them into the scriptures as his covenant towards you.

and you have to claim those promises and live by them. We are the same promises that Christ our Lord has left to us.

Jacob, who was the founder of an earthly nation, which were to be the people through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed, that's Jacob.

[17:53] And Jesus, who is the founder of a new nation and a new kingdom and a new family, he makes the same promises to us in the name of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

Those are the promises by which we are to live. You see, this is what's important, is his promise. It's not Jacob who is important.

It's the promises that were made to Jacob. And it's not you who are important. It's the promises that have been made to you.

It's the promises you are to receive. And by receiving those promises, you are to become a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

in you, God wants to fulfill his promise so that the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.

[19 : 00] So you need a dream and you need the promises of God. We need them. We need to claim them in a new way. And the third thing that Jacob did was he worshiped.

And that's what we need to do. The night on which Jacob did not say his prayers slept on a stone pillow alone, a fugitive, facing the utterly unknown.

He woke up starved with these tremendous words. It says, Ah.

And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. And he was afraid and said, How awesome is this place.

This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. Jacob was compelled to worship. We are compelled to worship when we've been given a dream, when we've been given from it.

[20 : 26] How awesome is this place. Isn't that wonderful? All of you who just learned to use that word because this word comes from.

Awesome. Awesome. This is, many of you were, I mean, some of you, I know we're hanging last week because why should the fear of the Lord be the beginning of wisdom?

Who wants to fear the Lord? But the fear of the Lord is beautifully expressed in this story. So if you want to know what the fear of the Lord is, it's Jacob waking up in the morning and saying, Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

how awesome is this place. It's the sudden breaking through into Jacob's life of a reality which he had no awareness of.

He says, I didn't know it. You see, the thing about worship, you're not worshipping what you know.

[21 : 47] You're worshipping what, in a sense, breaks through to you so that you know in a new way. You know for the first time. You know with new understanding. You know with a new awareness.

That's what the fear of the Lord is. This is the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.

God's and I did not know it. Earlier in Genesis, you see men trying to build a tower that will reach up to heaven.

Then when God acts, heaven opens down to us. And the Christian faith is not an attempt to build a tower that will give us some place from which we can see God.

But the Christian faith is in a sense running from the terrible awareness that God has opened heaven to us in Jesus Christ. When Stephen was dying with the stones of his persecutors being thrown at him, heaven opened.

[23 : 00] When Jesus was being baptized by John the Baptist, heaven opened. When the dream of that reality which is beyond the finite nature of our lives, breaks through to us, heaven opened.

And we have a glimpse and an awareness of the glory of the eternal God whose desire is for us.

And we can't help but like Jacob, be filled with a sense of awe and of worship and the sense of our own agnosticism.

And Jacob says, I didn't know. He doesn't. He lives time-afraid such deprived lives that he don't know.

we don't know the reality that belongs to us in Christ. We don't know the reality of the kingdom.

And probably the moment will come for us when, like Jacob, we will have to be given the grace in a sense to fall on our knees and say, I didn't know.

[24 : 34] Worship is the response to what God has spoken. And that passage which concludes the chapter 28, it tells what Jacob did and how he tried to respond to what God had done.

And you see, our worship is not in any sense an attempt for us to get together and try and be so pious and so religious and try and be so earnest that somehow we will attract God's attention and he will hear us.

Our response is a confused, proud, insufficient kind of thing, which is the best we can offer to a God who has broken in on us and made himself known to us.

And Jacob, what Jacob did in response is in a sense the structure and fabric of our worship in this very service this morning. The awareness that God will be with us, that God will keep us in the way, that God will give us bread to eat, that God will give us clothing to wear, that God will bring us to our Father's house in peace.

We will see there a rock which is set in the midst and the fact of the rock is that there is an eternity on which time washes like the water but never changes it.

[26 : 07] The rock remains the eternity of God's promise. And Jacob says, I'll give to you a tenth of all you've given to me.

That's all part of our worship, all part of our trying to respond to the God who has broken through to us to make himself known, to the God who has unilaterally made promises to us, that he has a purpose in which we are included and he will fulfill that purpose to the honor of his own name.

We are compelled to worship him, to offer him our whole hearts worship. That's the business we're involved in, that we're called upon to do.

to do. I want to let you think about this, the dream which we must bring, the promises by which alone we can be sustained, and the awesomeness of the God who has suddenly broken in on us so that we suddenly become aware of what we had never known or ever possibly could have met.

We must offer him our whole heart's gift. I want you just to kneel and sing quietly a hymn which comes from this passage of scripture, and it's hymn 49.

[27 : 48] This is the hymn by which all that is said of Jacob in this passage is captured for us.

We worship our God in these words as we kneel before him. God .

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. . . . 20... Thank you.

Thank you.

[29 : 48] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[31 : 48] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.