



**“Ascend a
Staircase with
Angels”**
Genesis 28:10-19a
July 27, 2008
Rev. Shelley Lavenne

Listening to our dreams and paying attention to our dreams is an important spiritual practice. It's one that over the last few hundred years, with the advent of modernity, we set aside. I certainly didn't pay attention to my dreams – except to be fearful of the nightmares – until I began my theological education. It wasn't necessarily in classes, but around the fringes where professors of spirituality and counseling would encourage us to pay attention to our dreams.

God finds all manner of ways to speak to us including our dreams. Our ancestors knew that. So they listened to their dreams – had others who would help them interpret what their dreams meant. It's a simple matter of taking the images that played out in our dreams and seeing what those have meant for us in day-to-day lives. Of course, God would speak in pictures to our ancestors and to us. It's a language we have in common with our ancestors. These dreams gave them an understanding of who they were and their destiny. And so often nightmares, once they are interpreted – aren't so scary at all.

Now mostly dreams we experience at night are messages from our subconscious specifically for us. But occasionally, occasionally, we are given dreams that are also for others.

Jacob's dream was such a dream – those angels going up and down the ladder. This dream is in the Bible because its message is not only for Jacob, but for us, as well. I've always known that – but I've not understood his dream. But thanks to a sermon by Rev. Bruce Sanguin of Canadian Memorial United Church in Vancouver, I have an inkling.¹

Jacob has just run away from his family because he's stolen his brother's birthright. His brother, Esau, was the first-born so in ancient custom, he would be the next leader of the people of Israel after his father, Isaac died. However, with his mother, Jacob has tricked his father into blessing him with this birthright. Esau's angry and he's a strong hunter. So Jacob runs off to live with his Uncle. And enroute he has this dream. .

If we're people who follow the rules of society – well Jacob did an immoral thing. He took what didn't belong to him. That's the way society goes – the eldest son inherits everything because he's the best leader. Right? Well, not necessarily.

I recall reading some research that the youngest child of a family can often be the more daring one, willing to take risks. And sometimes we need to take risks to grow and change.

¹ Bruce Sanguin, *Stairway to Heaven*, July 20, 2008
<http://www.canadianmemorial.org/sermons.htm>

In fact, the Scripture tells us that Esau's gift is actually in his ability as a hunter and a good provider. It's the younger brother, Jacob, who has the ability to be a leader of a nation of people who will pass the faith on to another generation.

Now you all know, because we've studied the Book of Genesis, that several chapters ahead, years later, Esau forgives Jacob. He welcomes his brother home with open arms. It will be like Esau has accepted that indeed his brother is the stronger leader but he, too, is gifted by God as a hunter and provider.

But right now, Jacob doesn't know the future. He's scared, he's frightened. He's challenged the societal structure in which he was raised and his only choice is to run for his life.

So the dream comes first as assurance. The angels remind Jacob that he is not alone. God is with him. Surely God is in this place.

Secondly, the image of the angels going up and down the ladder. Sanguin imagines it to be a circular staircase going further and further up.

As soon as I read his reference to a circular stair case, I remembered my excitement and anticipation going up a certain staircase several years ago. The building that houses Vancouver School of Theology near the University of British Columbia looks like an old stone structure from England with a tower room on top. When you'd see those top windows of that room from outside, I wanted to get up there to see the view. But few rarely did. Decades ago the architect had planned this beautiful room on top, but the church people who built the building, skimped on the structure – and the room couldn't be used by a large number of people for safety reasons.

Except that – one summer I was working at the school and one of the custodial staff took another staff person and I up to the room. Behind an old locked door was an old wooden spiral staircase. I remember us climbing and climbing up this dark staircase, passing floor after floor, around and around until finally we reached the top of the stairs and a door. We pushed open the door and we were greeted by sunlight, pouring through great windows on each of the four walls. We went from window to window seeing a beautiful view of the ocean, harbour and mountains that we'd never seen before.

Aren't our lives like a circular staircase? We start out as a baby and gradually gain independence, each stage of our life can be a different level of the stair case. But isn't that also the case of our spiritual life?

It's a continual spiral staircase. What God calls us to do is to continue to grow, always listen to what God is teaching us, opportunities in front of us that God is wanting us to learn from. God is with us – that great light along the journey and at the end, a great light that is also just the beginning.

God puts before us opportunities to learn and to grow in faith each day. If our life is boring – chances are we're not noticing God. Chances are we're not noticing, ignoring or running away from where God is calling us to go.

Jacob's dream was an assurance to him. He had challenged the status quo. He'd moved beyond the norm. Often that's what God calls us to do. We are to be a Spirit-led people; not necessarily ones that simply follow the norms of society or give in to our own fears.

These past two weeks, Joy and some of her peers were in swimming lessons. It's astounded each of us parents how our kids have progressed – facing fears and moving on. One little boy – went into the water no problem the first day. The second and third day he refused to go in the water. On the second day he wailed at the side with his mother and the third day, he cried in fear with his Dad. On the fourth day, his Dad got into the water with him – and then quickly left the pool but stayed on the pool deck nearby. The little boy was fine. We all cheered him on.

If the parents had let him give into his fears, he wouldn't have progressed. They knew they had to persist with him each day. And once he did move beyond his fear, a whole new world of swimming and movement in the water opened up for him.

I have to think that the parents are like God and the boy like us. Except that we're adults – and we have that free choice and free will thing going on. If we don't want to face our fear of going into the water -- we aren't going to. I don't have to go into that water; I'm not going to.

Meeting the new neighbours who look like they're from a different country – well, that seems like a lot of work, God, I'll have to get out of my comfort zone; I don't want to, I'm not going to. There's a situation at work, God, it's difficult. So I'll just keep putting my head in the sand. Our community is facing issues – I'm too busy – so I won't bother. I'm really lonely, God, but making new friends seems so difficult.

Sure, as adults we have that free choice blessing that God has given to us. But expect that God is as persistent with you as that little boys' parents. If we don't hear God the first time to face our fears, move beyond the status quo, God keeps finding other ways to speak to us – it may be in conversations with a friend, through a sermon – of all things, through dreams, through re-occurring coincidences.

God is ever so persistent with us – challenging us to climb up that beautiful spiral staircase. The one that has adventure and new possibilities on each step – the one that is full of light and leads to more beautiful light. It's the staircase upon which angels hover and bless us, with each step we take.

May we be ever so conscious of God's prodding in our lives – today, tomorrow, next week.
AMEN