

Understanding One Another: Judaism

7th Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Genesis 28:10-19

Welborne UMC ~ July 23, 2017

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Anyone have a good dream last night?

Dreaming is something common to our human experience. Whether we remember our dreams or not, we all dream. I expect most of us have had the experience of waking up from a dream and taking a few moments to figure out what is going on—where we are, what time it is—re-orienting ourselves to the reality of our bed and the middle of the night or the early hours of the morning. Do you know that moment?

That is the moment we need to remember as we hear the scripture from this morning. Jacob has had one of those dreams. He wakes from his sleep after an intense dream and says to himself, “The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn’t know it. He was terrified and thought, This sacred place is awesome. It’s none other than God’s house and the entrance to heaven.”¹ Jacob must have gone back to sleep—as many of us do after we are re-oriented—but he did not forget the dream. When he woke, first thing in the morning, he takes the stone he used for a pillow, pours oil on it, and renames the spot where he slept Bethel, which means God’s house.

This whole series of events points to a central piece of the Jewish faith which is helpful for us to remember as Christians. Understanding the Jewish faith may be a bit less daunting for us than last week—when we talked about understanding Hinduism—or next week—when we tackle understanding Islam. That is because the Jewish sacred texts are also our sacred texts, the Old Testament. We can assume some familiarity with them. However, our Christian perspective is so ingrained in many of us, that it is hard work to read these texts again with fresh eyes so that we might see an authentically Jewish emphasis.

Jacob’s encounter with his dream displays the ease with which his faith places God at the center of life, and the trust that dominates their relationship with God and their worship of God. As Phillip Wogaman writes in his book *What Christians Can Learn from Other Religions*, “Most of Hebrew Scripture is focused on who or what is our object of worship rather than on philosophical questions like how we can know what is true.”² Jacob doesn’t rise from his sleep to question why God came to him in a dream. He doesn’t question the extraordinary promises God makes him. He simply receives the fact that God has been present. He is so convinced of this that he is terrified, and treats the place as forever sacred.

¹ Genesis 20:16-17 CEB

² Wogaman, J. Phillip, *What Christians Can Learn from Other Religions*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. P. 19 of 129 Digital.

We would do well to tap into some of Jacob's ease at acknowledging God's presence. Many postmodern Christians are doubters when it comes to God's presence, particularly in new situations. In our tradition, we have come to rely a great deal on questioning truth with the reason in our heads, rather than relying on our hearts. Is God present in modern medical techniques that allow heart surgeries and cancer treatments? Absolutely! We can claim those procedures and treatments as God's healing Spirit. God has an inclination toward healing, and thankfully has given us the capacity to continually discover new ways of healing. At the same time, God holds us from our first breath to our last, and is with us to accompany us when healing is not possible. How do we know that is true? How do we understand when one procedure works and another does not? How can we be sure God is present? These are the questions with which we wrestle. The Jewish faith would help us place much more emphasis on trusting that God IS present in all circumstances. Rather than asking why or how, Judaism invites us to simply honor God's presence and the ways God reveals Godself.

There is a second piece of this scripture that points to another foundational belief of Judaism which is worth us understanding and embracing more fully. To talk about this piece, let me pause first and remind us who Jacob is. Jacob is one of the patriarchs of the book of Genesis, one of the leading roles in the first stories of scripture. This portion of the book of Genesis—chapters 12-50--are widely understood to be ancestral history of the Hebrew people. Abraham and Sarah begin this story with their journey from their homeland in response to God's promises. Their long-awaited son Isaac and his wife Rebekah are the parents of twin boys Jacob and Esau. As we meet Jacob in this story, he has just cheated his brother out of his inheritance and is on his way to find a wife. That is the journey we meet him on as he stops to sleep and has this astounding dream.

In the dream, God speaks to Jacob and reminds him of his ancestry and the promises which follow him with these words:

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.¹⁴ Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants.¹⁵ I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you."³

With a quick reading this sounds like another of God's promises of blessing upon Jacob and his ancestors and descendants. Many of us know that the Jewish people think of themselves as a people chosen by God, and rightly so. What we must also understand along with that is embedded in this text, in verse 14. "Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants."⁴ God's choosing of Jacob and the Jewish people is not so that they will be blessed beyond all measure. They are chosen and given a responsibility. Being God's people

³ Genesis 28:13-15 CEB

⁴ Genesis 28:14

carries with it the responsibility to bless every family of the earth. Being God's people carries with it a responsibility to work in the world for the justice and mercy described by the prophets.

As Philip Wogaman writes,

"I do not know many Christians who are comfortable with the idea that the Jews are the only chosen people; I know I am not. But, if being chosen is expressed as responsibility, do we not have something important to learn from Judaism? If we want to think of ourselves as chosen, is it not in that very same sense: to be chosen not for special privilege but for special responsibility? Protestant Christians speak of this as a vocation or calling from God. So, we too, can speak of being chosen, not only as individual Christians, but as a whole church, to be God's servant in a broken world."⁵

How are we chosen? How is Welborne chosen, right here, right now, to be God's servant in a broken world? This week we were chosen to bring children from different cultures and neighborhoods together to learn about the earliest Christians in our Vacation Bible School. I believe we are chosen to not only feed our neighbors who are hungry, but to develop relationships with them that will heal divisions of class, race, and other biases in our community. We are chosen not just to occupy a prize piece of real estate on a corner in Richmond's West End, but to be a catalyst for healing and hope in this community where we live.

Understanding these two pieces of the Jewish faith—an emphasis on God's presence in everything from strange dreams to simple stones; and an emphasis on being chosen not merely for a blessing, but primarily for a responsibility—understanding these two pieces of the Jewish faith can help us claim more fully our calling at Welborne as individuals and as a congregation. God is present here. Now. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is loose in our midst. Let us respond to the presence of God by discerning our role as servants in the Kingdom that we find revealed, here and now.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ Wogaman, p 23 of 129. Digital.