

Promises, Promises

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 July 2017

**A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
(read by Clare Brockett)**

Pentecost 7A

Genesis 28:10-19a; Wisdom of Solomon 12: 13, 16-19; Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

Margaret has asked me to read her reflection today. The opening words will explain why.

Dear Pitt Street Friends,

Yesterday, I got stuck in New Zealand. On Friday, Timaru, the town where my parents live got a month's rainfall in a day, along with gale force winds and freezing temperatures... There was flooding throughout the eastern South Island and a State of Emergency was declared. Streets were impassable and some homes in low lying areas were evacuated. The rain stopped on Friday evening and I thought flood waters would recede and I'd be fine to drive to Christchurch yesterday and fly back to Sydney. However, the rains returned during Friday night and about 40 km of the road from Timaru to Christchurch was closed overnight. The road opened mid-afternoon yesterday but too late for me to make the flight.

Plan B was that I would write the sermon and Clare would read it. She was quite clear that my usual style of finishing it off at 8 am on Sunday morning was not acceptable. So here it is, a 'finished on Saturday afternoon' reflection. I am very grateful that Clare is willing to read it.

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The story of Jacob's dream, of Jacob's ladder, is part of the pre-history mythology of the ancient Israelites. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebecca, and grandson of Abraham and Sarah. He was the twin of Esau, and he came out of the womb second, grasping Esau by the heel. As a young man, he tricked Esau out of his birthright and by deception received the blessing of the first born from their father. Esau, did not get over this in a hurry, and vowed that he would kill Jacob after their father's death. Rebecca decided that it would be a good idea to pack Jacob off to the relatives in the hope that Esau might eventually get over it.

So, the story we heard today, of the dream and the ladder, occurred on the way to Haran, where Rebecca had arranged for Jacob to go and stay with her brother Laban.

Jacob's dream of a ladder, of angels ascending and descending, of God above and God below, of God powerfully present in this surprising place of banishment, has gripped the imagination of artists, religious and secular for millennia, including inspiring Led Zeppelin's "*Stairway to Heaven*."

It wasn't hard to find a good image for the front cover of the liturgy booklet this week. There were so many possibilities from classical and contemporary art. I decided to use Brian Whelan's contemporary, mystical painting rather the medieval icon that depicts believers on different rungs of the ladder, doing their best to ascend, while demons were biting at their ankles!

I'm less interested in decoding the dream than I am in looking at the context of the dream and Jacob's response to it.

Not only does the dream happen in a surprising place. It happens to a very surprising person. It's worth considering the moral character of the protagonist, Jacob. Jacob, a badly-behaved swindler, who is on the run from his own brother, is the one who experiences an amazing, transformative spiritual encounter. One commentator said that Jacob is the sort of man who has you checking to be sure your wallet is still there after he passes by. Until this point, he doesn't seem to have grasped the search for meaning, for place, for identity, for relationship with God that were central for his parents and grandparents.

He has swindled his brother (who was admittedly a bit dense in the encounter) and tricked his father (who was assisted by his mother). He's on the run, on the edge of a nowhere town, sleeping rough and using a rock as a pillow. It is under these circumstances that he has this vision, this encounter with the Divine, and he is promised a profound blessing.

The heights of human experience of the divine intersect with the depths of human experience, in the dream of morally dodgy fugitive.

One of the things I love about the Hebrew Bible is that it is clear that the God of Promises does not wait around for people to be perfect before they are blessed. The same God who used Moses, who had a speech impediment, to call the people out of Egypt, who spoke through a weird and grumpy lot of prophets, who used Rahab, a foreign prostitute to provide hospitality and protection for God's people, promises Jacob that God will be with him and keep him, and that there will be a place for him and his descendants in which to dwell.

It should be remembered, because this promise of land has been used by the modern state of Israel to justify dispossession of Palestinians from their land, that Palestinians are equally descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. As I said last week when we were considering the prophecy of Isaiah, the misuse of a story does not render the alternative wisdom of a story invalid.

Promises, promises...

I resonate with the phrase in the United Church of Canada creed, "*we are not alone, we live in God's world.*" It conveys the promise, the assurance that Jacob experienced, that the material, physical world which we encounter with our senses is not without meaning. It is suffused with the Divine Presence. It is in the Sacred that we live and move and have our being.

It is worth considering Jacob's response to his dream: awe, astonishment, worship, in words and in deeds. Jacob pours oil, anointing the rock that was his pillow, and he renames the place where the dream happened as Beth-el "House of God."

How do we honour the experiences that tip us into another dimension, the moments when we see clearly who we are, and how God wills the world to be?

In the verses that immediately follow the lectionary reading, we are told more of Jacob's response.

“Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I can come again to my father’s house in peace, then Yahweh shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.’”

Jacob’s awe was translated into actions, not just words of awe and ritual acts, but also a commitment to generosity. In response to sensing the Sacred, Jacob not only anointed the rock on which he slept, he also offered ten percent of his wealth to God.

Over and over again in this passage we hear reference to place. The word place is repeated six times!

God is in this place. It is a truism in the modern church that God is not contained in a church building, that God is everywhere, and yet we mark the places where we know we have experienced God in powerful and convincing ways.

Here we are in this place, many of us week after week, coming back to this experience of Spirit and community that we find here. The history of this church is called *Pride of Place*. When I first heard the title, I was unsettled. I questioned whether we should have pride in our place? Isn’t that a recipe for self-satisfaction?

But as I have spent time in Pitt Street Church, in the building and with the people, I feel that it is much more than its old stone walls and beautiful curved staircases. Pride of this place comes from the ministries that have been nurtured here. It comes because of the way of living inclusively, because of an openness to the Spirit that is intellectually critical and curious. It is as if the walls have been imbued with passion and compassion.

This is a place where the milestones of human life: birth, love and death, have been honoured and celebrated for generations. The stories of human lives that have sought for meaning and purpose in light of the Christian story are part of this place. It is more than wood and stone. The walls are more than physical material because they are witnesses to liturgy and community. On a rational level, I can understand why this would be felt by people who have been coming here for decades. But it is also true for me and for others who have come here more recently. It is for Beth-el, a house of God, where despite our insistence that God is not contained in our sacred places, we gather hopeful that we will encounter the Sacred.

Ancient and contemporary consciousness share common ground in acknowledging the power of place to locate meaning and evoke memory.

For many people, spiritual and secular, there are other sacred places. In Maori, people speak of *turangawaewae*, a place where a person has the right to stand and speak, a place where a person has rights of residence and belonging, through kinship and *whakapapa* or ancestry.

Many Australians whether indigenous, or migrants, or descendants of colonial settlers, experience the sacred in wild places of nature – at the beach, in the mountains, or in the bush. These places represent a yearning for connection with that which is beyond us.

Our understanding of the separation we experience from authentic life and our actual lives may not be represented in the hierarchy of a ladder that stretches between heaven and earth. Yet, like the ancients we are aware of both the distance and the in-breaking, the separation and the connection. God is beyond us. God is with us. God is in this place.

Jacob senses the power of God, the reality of God at home with us, dwelling with us.

And so he marks and re-names this holy place of his dream of heaven and earth. This is the place where he hears the voice of the sacred; was it a roar? Or was it a whisper, reaffirming the promise to his parents and his grandparents?

God makes real the promise: you are not alone, you live in my world. Beth-el. Place of God.

Later theologians have called these places, these experiences, by other names: *thin* places in the spirituality of the Celts, or *liminal* spaces where heaven and earth meet.

God is in this place - and yet we hear in God's promises something more, something new; for God promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes. Not just in the land of promise.

In ancient times, gods were often associated with a specific place or land. But this god of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca and their offspring - is not limited to one place or time.

There is a tension for people of faith in our love for our places of worship, our sacred spaces, because God is not associated ultimately with place, but in the relationships and promise.

And yes, as embodied creatures, we do experience God in places that we can feel. Places that we can cherish, places that evoke memories, places that we mourn when they are lost to us. Human beings - creatures shaped by place - as well as time.

When we think of the ancestors of the Hebrew Bible, they wandered, they were led, were taken in exile, went on pilgrimage. And still their journeys have places of sacred meaning and return.

Yet these places never became the final objective where one settles in. Rather, they provide sustenance for the ongoing journey.

This story invites us to counter-cultural dreaming. We are creatures of a scientific and technological age. But we must not lose our dreams. God's dream - for a healed earth of people living in right relationship in a just peace where the "enough for all" that already exists is shared with all.

Our sacred story promises a return - to a divine communion with planet and creatures and people - not just for the saints, but for the flawed, ordinary people that we are.

May our church continue to be Beth-el - nourishing the journey.

A sacred place for a pilgrim people.