

Dreams

Genesis 28:10-19

Parkminster United Church – Sunday, May 14, 2023

I know that here at Parkminster we have several people who are into cycling – some even bike here to church on a Sunday morning. If you happen to ride a bike, do you remember your very first one? My first real bike was a birthday present from my parents for my sixth birthday. It was a beautiful purple bike that sparkled in the sunlight and had a banana seat (do you remember those?) and streamers in a multitude of colours on each handlebar. My dad made sure the training wheels were in place on the day, so that he could help me ride my new bike on my birthday.

I remember getting up on the seat and immediately sensing the power of the bike as I placed my feet on the peddles and tried to ride away. I wobbled at first, but then felt the center of balance... Finding that place between balance and power is the secret to riding a bike and it is not that easy to discover, especially when you're first learning. But once you discover it, the world awaits. Once I got the hang of it, my bike—was my ticket to ride. Thus, began countless days riding around the neighbourhood with my friends, and for me, the most magical times of those childhood bike rides were as dusk approached, the streetlights started coming on (a signal to head home) and it was like riding through a dream world.

I haven't been on a bike much as an adult – but there are times that I think about it – I sometimes wonder if I could find my way back to that joy, that freedom, that dream-like feeling that cycling brought to my spirit as a child. Would I fall in love with it all over again? The joy of it, the incredible sense of freedom, the feeling of flying through space and time – would it all come back to me, as if in a dream? Whether it's cycling, walking, hiking – just being out in creation brings me a sense of holiness about the experience, a sense of the Divine presence, a sense of something more, something bigger.

Today's Scripture reading from the Book of Genesis leads us into a sense of something more, something bigger. This story doesn't involve bikes, but instead, ladders. Out there in the night, in the middle of nowhere, Jacob had a dream. In it, there were messengers scurrying back and forth between heaven and earth, traveling up and down a ladder. When he awoke from the dream, he says, "Truly YHWH is in this place, and I never knew it." What began as an ordinary night, with only a stone for a pillow, ends up being a place where God is present in an extraordinary way. When he awakes, Jacob was so full of the dream, he poured oil on the rock and gave it the name, Bethel—which means "House of God."

Do you know Bethel? Is there a place or a time or a dream of God which is so real to you, so utterly opening and powerful that you cannot forget how it feels? Beth-el—that place where we know that God IS—Jacob was so moved by the presence of God, he named the place so he would never forget it and so he would always be able to go back—even if it was only in his mind.

How often do you dream? I'm not just talking about the ones that may happen as you sleep – but how often do you let your spirit, your soul, dream? Often in the busyness of life we don't have time for dreams, and it is not easy to remember them if we do come across a good one. Our lives are busy—managing, organizing, working, trying to make a living, scrambling to relax at the end of a long week; we sometimes even fill up empty time with tasks, because that is what we sometimes think we are “supposed” to do. But in order to dream, as Jacob did, we need to be able to stop all of the above, and find a different place every now and then, a different rhythm, a moment out of time in order to discover and open to the House of God right where we are.

When Jacob had his dream, he was out in the middle of nowhere and he was on the run from a life where he had lied and cheated his way into a birthright. He is spiritually exiled and lost to himself and to those he loved most. But—our dreams can come at the strangest times, and they can challenge us from the way things are by helping us to open to what could be, if we allow our dreams to take hold. In Jacob's time, dreams were seen as a doorway to the realm of God, a way to receive sacred instruction about how to act on earth. Dreams were seen as powerful connections to the sacred.

And so, I ask this question again, how often do you dream? Theologian and writer Barbara Brown Taylor asserts that we have lost confidence in our dreams, we no longer trust in our ability to see a world as different than what the world is; we don't trust easily in the presence of God becoming as real to us as a hand on our shoulder or a voice in our ear. We are dedicated to the practical, the real, the necessary and the ordered she says. And while that too most certainly has its place, what if we could pull apart, walk out into the back field, and place our head on a stone for a cold night or put a foot on a pedal and ride, what dream would we have?

Would we be able to dream of a world once again that was whole and aching to be healed? Would we see a flock of messengers, moving between heaven and earth, reminding us of God's vision of a peaceable world? What is the dream that is waiting to come to fruition for us in these times? Can we dream our dream for justice that connects us to God's realm? What have we not allowed ourselves to feel or think or witness because we have not allowed ourselves to imagine or vision or feel? Could we dream a dream of compassion, justice, kindness that we

have not seen yet? An opportunity for transformation, rather than simply allowing ourselves only the way things are.

A church, a community of faith, is a Beth-el, a house of God. In God's house we get to do things a little differently. Instead of getting stuck in policy, or expediency, or even the way things have always been, the Church gets to dream of new ways to be—to have the humility to recognize growing edges, to speak the truth with love, and the courage to heal ourselves even as we seek a way toward helping the healing of others. People of faith get to refuse to be realistic, but instead get to recognize the holy in our lives as incitement to place our energies into our highest value including awe, wonder, amazement, vulnerability, and radical justice for all. God's vision for a whole and healed people are part of the reason we come to church—because here in this place, we can dream and listen for the words of assurance— “I am with you, I will give to you, I will be present to you, I will not leave you.” Or echoed in the words of A New Creed that we say at baptism: We are not alone, we live in God's world.

In the Bible, we read that people encounter God under shady oak trees, on the top of mountains, in the middle of rivers, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, and burning bushes. When people want to know more about God, Jesus tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. That's true in this time too. God shows up through a moving piece of music in worship, through the welcome of baptism, in words that stir our hearts and challenge us – but also in outreach with organizations in our community, in the care and partnerships with refugee families, in a card sent with care, in the gentle hug when we can't hold back the tears in our eyes, in a word of forgiveness, of understanding, of grace. The House of God stretches well beyond this place – from one corner of the universe to the other.

Jacob awoke from his dream and knew instantly that God was in this place. God is present even in the most difficult places. But God is not merely present, God has a dream, a vision for all those places. God's desire is peace, justice, kindness, compassion, and love. Not merely for one or two of us, not for the chosen or the well behaved—God's dream is for all the families of the earth. Beth-el is not a single place, somewhere we can go to—Beth-el is wherever God is and where people are living, praying, acting, and dreaming of peace and justice in the world.

Your dream may come while you're awake, while you're walking, while you're feeding your children, riding your bike, or driving to work. It may come through tears, it may come through a conversation with a friend, it may come as you read or pray. When God's voice speaks to you, pay attention. Listen to the words of unconditional love and believe them. Look around you and

realize that you're standing on sacred ground, but then, what ground isn't? If God promises to be with us everywhere, isn't all ground holy ground? The playground where children's stories begin? The hospital cafeteria, where bread is broken? The foyer after church, where people linger as the conversations grow deeper? When God speaks to us in our dreams, we wake from restlessness, we wake from aimless wandering. We wake as people of transformation and hope, with direction and purpose, and we are never the same again.

May we dream dreams that call us into lives of justice and compassion, love and respect for each other and care and concern for all creation. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power