

“Questions About Mysticism”
Sermon from Genesis 28:10-16
Given Sunday, February 6, 2022
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he passed the night there. He took a rock and used it for a headrest and lay down to sleep there. During the night he had a dream: there was a ladder, standing on the ground with its top reaching to heaven; and messengers of God were going up and coming down the ladder. YHWH was there, standing over him, saying, “I am YHWH, the God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Rebecca and Isaac. Your descendants will be like the specks of dust on the ground; you will spread to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, and all the tribes of the earth will bless themselves by you and your descendants. Know that I am with you. I will keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; I will not desert you before I have done all that I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke and said, “Truly, YHWH is in this place, and I never knew it!”

—

You might think a dream like this would change Jacob. You might think a realization like the one he has when he wakes up - that God really is here - would have some effect on how he lives and moves in the world. Several rabbis who provide commentary on this story say, “well, . . . not yet.” In the scenes that follow, we see Jacob much like we saw him before this dream - making deals, sneaking and cheating, looking out for only himself. It will take a few more strange encounters to wear away at that. But the dream does give the rest of us lots to think about.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman writes, “The news [of this dream] is that there is traffic between heaven and earth. Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. Heaven has to do with earth. And earth may finally count on the resources of heaven.”

The Taizé community in France suggests that the angels, the messengers going up and coming down the ladder, are holding things of earth and things of heaven: the ones going up are carrying to God Jacob’s fear, his suffering, his guilt. And the ones coming down are bringing to Jacob God’s presence, God’s words, God’s promise.

Levi Yitzhak, one of the great Hasidic masters, says the ladder might represent human beings in this world. Each of us is firmly planted on the earth; each of us reaches upward toward the heavens. The scurrying angels in the dream are the things we do: when we perform an act of mercy, kindness, goodness, that’s like more happening in heaven, we are effecting a form of cosmic repair—what’s called *tikkun olam* in Judaism—and those actions send angels up the ladder. When we violate the will of God, when we violate ourselves or one another or this world, we do damage to the very cosmos—and that damage is represented by the angels coming down. He says, so, both heaven and earth are affected by what we do, and are in a constant state of being formed and reformed, harmed and healed, by our choices.

So, lots of different interpretations of this strange dream are out there. Here's one thing a surprising number of them agree on: we talk about Jacob's ladder, but the Hebrew word is something more like "ramp." Several scholars suggest that Jacob's dream is about something like a Mesopotamian ziggurat, a structure that would've reflected the imperial religion of the culture. It's a land mass formed as a temple and believed to be a place where earth touches heaven, often steps are carved into the mass, making travel up and down the structure easier. In other words, people who study these texts are in agreement that this dream is not so much about a ladder, but a . . . stairway to heaven.

Counting this one, there are 21 dreams in the Bible - ten in Genesis, six in Matthew, a few others scattered about. There are some that are symbolic, and we get interpretations of them - but most of the dreams in the Bible are pretty straightforward. Think, like, the dreams Joseph has around Jesus' birth in the book of Matthew: "believe what Mary is telling you about this baby," "don't go home while Herod is on the throne," "hang out in Egypt for a while," "ok, now it's safe."

These dreams are one way God connects, communicates with people in scripture: dreams when they're asleep, visions when they're awake. There's also creation, angels, prophets, casting lots, a fire, a burning bush, writing on a wall, a donkey, trumpets, thunder and lightning, and more that God speaks through in the Hebrew scriptures. And in the New Testament: through Jesus, nature, angels, prayer, prophets, signs and wonders, other scripture, people who don't believe, and the church.

During this season of Epiphany, this time when we're invited to think about the ways God's own self has been revealed, as a congregation we're taking up our big questions about that. What do these revelations leave unanswered? For all that we've been told and taught about God, for all we might have learned on our own along the way, what do we still wonder about? You've submitted questions, I've tried to pair or group them in ways that make sense, and today, we're looking at these two:

- Why is the mystical so absent in Protestantism? And
- Does God still speak to us in dreams and visions, like in the Bible?

I should say, these questions are related, but not exactly the same. The question about dreams and visions is a question of divine initiative: how does God speak to people, today, if God does? And the question about mysticism is about human initiative: a mystic is one who undergoes some work, some process, in hopes of achieving a sense of union with the divine: dying to a false self, entering into an ecstatic state where some kind of union might be possible, a revelation often of how deep and wide the love of God is; and then a re-entering of ordinary life, where that revelation infuses all that they do, and every act becomes one of ecstatic communion.

Mysticism isn't unique to Christianity, and those stages aren't unique to Christian mystics. Mystics of religious traditions the

world over undergo this process - this dying-to-self, rising-in-the-divine kind of experience. They all point, says historian B. McGinn, they all point to *the Beyond that is within*.

And that's powerful. For a young girl in the 1400s whose parents send her off to a nunnery because they think they won't fetch a good enough bride price for her, it's powerful to experience the indwelling of a spirit that says her worth is beyond measure because she is beloved by God. For a man with an illness who's been cast out on the street, it's powerful to hear a voice promising healing, to feel a warming that begins in his heart and spreads through his body, telling him that this vessel he inhabits that is currently causing his pain will one day soon be healed and will radiate the glory of God.

It's powerful for each of them, individually. But it's also powerful in a society, where access to learning has been limited - it's powerful for people who have historically been denied that access to come forward and announce that they've had their own experience of the divine, and don't need to rely on whatever small teachings are dished out to them in appropriate spoonfuls by the authorities. And that kind of power is frightening.

Because there's always been a fine line between mysticism and madness. What is the Beyond that makes itself known deep within? Is it holy or demonic? Is it sacred or senseless? And what does it mean to human structures of power if there are people who have direct access to the divine?

Today, we tend to think of mysticism as quiet contemplation, as deep meditation, as the kind of practice that allows for visions to come when a person is able to entirely focus on opening her consciousness to the divine. We think of light and softness and stillness. Historically, those who experienced union with God often did so with all of their senses heightened in wild ways - they smelled and tasted and heard and felt God's presence, all the world around them alive with God's presence, in ways that made them scream and cry and laugh and sing and undress in public.

Emma Green, writing for *The Atlantic*, says the difference between a beloved saint who says he's achieved mystical union and a bedraggled homeless man who says he's the son of God largely comes down to the culture they appear in.

There was a time when interpretation belonged to the church, those who were ill came to priests for diagnosis, and most happenings were attributed either to God or to the devil. The Middle Ages saw the development of medical practice, and physicians of that time often saw cases of spiritual possession as still under the authority of the church. If they determined the root cause was in the body, they'd call it theirs. If they thought the root cause was in the mind - body and mind being distinct, they thought - they'd send the person back to the priests.

But Green says that during and following the Protestant Reformation, things began to change. Accusations of madness were often used as a form of political power, used to argue for the legitimacy of one Christian denomination over another. Churches

that clung to mystic traditions were seen as superstitious, and lost followers to what were perceived to be more rationally-minded traditions. She says, “Polite society began to distance itself from stories and traditions that preserved these encounters, and politeness, as you know, is a key marker of the modern church.

But here’s what I think might be important to remember: what was revealed to mystics - a constant and common refrain - across places and ages and even traditions - what is revealed to mystics is how much is still, and will always be, unknown.

Meister Eckhart, in the 1200s in Germany, said that even *being* and *goodness* are “garments” under which God is hidden. Even *being* and *goodness*, those notions are “veils” that hide God. He urged his hearers in the 1200s, “Let us pray to God that we might be free of ‘God,’ that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal.”

Which is to say, for whatever threat mysticism might have been, might still be, it’s not because it would bring any new teaching; it’s not because it would propose any unapproved doctrine. The threat of a dream or a vision or a mystical encounter with God is that *it might undo what has been* - what has been taught, what has been learned, what has been assumed - it might begin to dissolve all of that.

One more thing about Jacob’s dream: Before he leaves his home, his family is torn apart because he goes to his father and steals the

blessing that belongs to his brother. His brother goes to his father and says, “Have you only one blessing? Bless me, also!” And his father says, “I can’t. What’s done is done.”

And Jacob has this dream that tells him that his blessing will be as widespread as the dust. The loose dirt that covers the ground in every direction and provides a thin layer of fertility that sustains all life on earth. Earlier blessings are about the countlessness of the stars, or grains of sand. Jacob’s dream undoes the notion that God’s blessing has to be limited, that it couldn’t be forever and for all.

As to the question of whether God still speaks to people today in dreams and visions, I’m going to let two of our own congregation, Kathleen Verigin and Gloria LaFata, share their own experiences in answer to that.

(Testimony Video)