

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

At the risk of giving you all Too Much Information about myself: I snore. At least, that's what my wife Marianne tells me. I honestly don't know, because I've never heard myself snore. My children attest to the fact that I snore, so given the odds of three to one, I do have to accept the fact that I do, yes, indeed: snore.

Not only do I snore, but Marianne tells me that my snoring has gotten worse, and at times I do that whole "stop breathing" thing, so, I'm scheduled to have a sleep study – I am SO excited. To the best of my understanding, a sleep study is where I get to go to a strange place, have a bunch of people I don't know hook up a whole lot of wires to me, and then attempt to sleep in an unfamiliar bed, all while being watched. I am SO not going to sleep that night.

But before all that happened, I had to have a preliminary examination by the sleep doctor (he has a fancier title than that, but I figure if I say "sleep doctor" we all know what I am talking about.) So in the course of the exam (other than telling me I drink far too much Mt. Dew), he asked me do I dream? Do I remember my dreams? What do I dream about? Do my dreams ever wake me up? Things like that. And so I had to tell him well, yes. I know that I do dream, although I seldom remembered them when I wake up in the morning. I know that many times I will wake up during the night and think, 'oh, wow, that's a really cool dream, I'll have to tell Marianne about it in the morning.' Then morning comes and I don't remember anything (other than the dreams I have about fighting vampires . . . don't ask me, I don't understand it myself). Anyway, I guess sometimes, with the dreams I've had, if I DID remember them, and then relate those dreams to others, you all might think that I was maybe a little crazy or on some medication of some kind, which actually kind of sounds like the story about Jacob we heard tonight and the dream that he had.

Now in our story thus far, Jacob is the second son (younger) twin son of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac, of course, is the son of Abraham and Sarah, who is the half brother to Ishmael. You don't need to remember all those names, but it is Abraham and Sarah who received the covenant from God: "I will be your God, you shall be my people, and your descendants shall outnumber the stars in the sky." So Jacob's older brother, (older by about all of three seconds) is Esau, or "Hairy" as it can be also translated. So "Hairy" is an outdoors kind of a guy, and apparently he's not that bright, because previously back in chapter 25, Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of red lentil stew and some bread. Then, in chapter 27, Jacob and mom worked together to get old blind Isaac to give the firstborn blessing, not to the first born Esau, but instead to the second born Jacob. As you might guess, older brother Esau gets really ticked off at younger brother Jacob, and as he says in vs. 41, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." So mother Rebekah hears this, once again conspires with her younger son, this time, basically, to get as much distance between him and his older brother as possible.

So the story continues: Jacob leaves the camp. He gets a legitimate blessing from Jacob. Jacob sends him off back to the home lands. Just as his father Abraham wanted Isaac to marry a ritually clean woman, not one of those Ba' al worshipping Canaanite women, but Abraham wanted Isaac to marry a ritually clean woman so he married Rebekah who was the daughter of Abraham's brother, Isaac and Rebekah send Jacob to Rebekah's brother Laban to go find a spouse. Laban lives over in Aram. Isaac and his family are in what we know as Palestine. It's a couple of hundred miles journey, not something that he can just hop on the donkey and be there the next afternoon, he's really got to travel away. But it's there at Uncle Laban's place that Jacob will eventually meet and fall in love with Rachel, who is the younger sister of Leah, both of whom he'll marry, and like his grandfather, Abraham, before him, Jacob ends up having girl problems, and fertility issues, and before the whole thing is over, he ends up with FOUR wives (I can barely keep up with one). Eventually Jacob will reconcile with his brother Esau, but that happens much further on – the rest of that story all takes place in chapters 29-33. (It's a really interesting story, it doesn't take all that long to read, it's only about five pages long in my Bible. I would say it rivals "Desperate Housewives" or even "24", take a few minutes tonight before you go to bed, just read chapters 29-33, it's really quick, honest it won't hurt.)

But tonight we have the beginning of that whole long story – when Jacob is leaving home. When he's getting ready to run away from his brother who wants to kill him as soon as dad dies. He's running away, he's leaving the land that God has promised Abraham and his descendants. He's going back to that *heathen* land, that *pagan* land, that *foreign* land, where the name of the Lord God Almighty is NOT known. (I do find it interesting that as he leaves the land of his birth and then about fifteen years later when he returns and reconciles with Esau, **each** of those times he has an encounter with God. On his way out, Jacob encounters God as we heard tonight in a dream. On his way back, he'll encounter God in a wrestling match.) But while most often when we get this passage we tend to focus on Jacob's dream. Did you pay attention to what came AFTER the dream? When he woke up he marked that place. He took his pillow (he used a stone), and he took that stone and he anointed it with oil the way the kings will be anointed with oil, the way that when we were baptized, we too were anointed with oil. He took oil, he anointed the stone and he marked that place because he knew that something significant had happened to him there and he wanted to remember it.

Now up until this point in his life we really don't know a whole lot about Jacob's faith life, other than the fact that he lied to his father about it. But something happened to him there at that place, something inside of Jacob changed to the point that he was so moved that he marked the spot. He named the spot Beth-el, "House of El", "House of the Lord."

Human beings, I think, do that a lot. We make sacred places. Or perhaps I should say, that we mark sacred places. This place -- Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church – is an example. Although I would argue that Trinity is more than a BUILDING – Trinity is really the congregation. But there are places that are sacred to me: the Black Hills; Yellowstone; and the Grand Canyon. Or one of my really most sacred places is the Interstate 90 overlook by the Missouri River, just outside of Chamberlain, South Dakota. You can stand there and look west for 150 miles. Now for native Pennsylvanians, they usually freak out, because you don't see any

trees. It's wide open, it's flat. You can see almost all the way into Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where the Bad Lands begin. It's an amazing beautiful open space.

But I know that we as a nation have sacred places too, don't we? The White House, Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, or even more recently the Twin Towers and Ground Zero. In Jacob's case, he believed that the Lord God Almighty was there in that place, at that place. Not necessarily traveling with him, but RIGHT there at that place.

Now, **we** know that the Lord God Almighty is not confined to one spot. God is NOT geographically restricted. I can feel God's presence in all of those places that I find to be sacred. But, I also know that God is with me **WHEREVER** I go. God is just as present in my life when I am at the Cinema Center of Camp Hill watching "Ironman" as God is present in my life as I lead worship at Fischer Chapel at Camp Nawakwa. God is as present in my life at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church as God is present in my life as I celebrated my birthday last January at Disneyworld.

Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, experience that "real presence" of God. The real presence that we talk about as being part of the bread and wine, the body and blood that we share at communion. The real presence that we say is part of the waters of our baptism. But the real presence that Jacob experienced in a way that perhaps none of us have ever experienced . . . or maybe you have? Maybe God has spoken to you in a dream, the way that God spoke to Jacob. That presence was so strong in Jacob's life that when he awoke from that experience, it radically changed him. I've had experiences in my life when I say that I have felt the true presence of God in ways that I haven't in most of my normal everyday situations. I know that regardless of my snoring, that I have experienced that real presence, both sleeping and awake, dreaming or conscious. I know that God is real, and despite those times when those twinges of doubt creep in, despite the times that I know **WHAT** I'm doing is in direct conflict with my beliefs, I **do** know that God is real, and active, and part of not only **MY** everyday life, but yours as well.

So maybe we can take a lesson from Jacob and learn to mark those places in our life. Those times when we feel closest to God, those times when we feel God's breath on the back of our neck, or that hand on our shoulder. That we mark those **EVERYDAY** occurrences, so that we might remember that not only is God here in this place, in this building, in this House of the Lord, but so, too, is God present in our hearts.

Amen.

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