

Great stories often begin with words that set them off in time and space.

“Once upon a time” -

They trigger our imaginations and prompt us to listen in a special way.

“Once Upon a Time” is the theme of the music festival this year.

We are hearing music inspired by stories.

Last Sunday's symphony by Zemlinsky was inspired by Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*.

It begins with these words:

“Far out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower -
and as clear as crystal, it is very, very deep.

No cable could fathom it. Many church steeples piled one upon another,
would not reach from the ground beneath to the surface of the water above ...”

These words invite us to suspend our normal thinking.

Another story transformed to music this season will be the Gurre-Lieder by Arnold Schoenberg

based on the ancient legend of the Danish people.

Hear the words that begin the story Schoenberg has turned to music:

Now stills the twilight every sound on land and sea,
The far-sailing clouds are anchored now in harbor by heavens lee
Peace hath closed the wooden portals silently at night's behest...

It draws us to a peaceful place and invites a deeper level of consciousness.

Then there are the stories that it just seems natural

for them to begin with “Once upon a time...” -

because we want to convey their timelessness – and their truth -

not the kind of truth as in a true story because it happened one time to one person -

but because they happen to us all at sometime in our lives.

“Once upon a time...”

“there was a sower who went out to sow...” – from last week's parable.

Today's story - has - within it - a dream.

Dreams are teachers that teach us at a deeper level than daily awareness -

like poetry and legend – and music inspired by it.

Dreams in the Bible have always been important.

Dreams have been important in psychology.
They are gateways to bigger worlds – and many say gateways to the eternal.

And now back to our story for today...

“Once upon a time...”

There was a young man who cheated his older brother,
and when the older brother, whose name was Esau,
found out what the younger brother, whose name was Jacob, had done,
he hated him and vowed to kill him.

Word of those threats reached their mother’s ears, and Rebekah became afraid for his life.

She persuaded Jacob to leave for awhile.

She knew Esau would soon be over his rage.

and if Jacob would simply absent himself for awhile,

all would be soon forgiven and forgotten.

So Rebekah sent Jacob to live with her brother Laban.

And, Jacob went along with her plan and headed toward Haran.

But, on the way, something happened
that would change the way Jacob looked at the world and his relationship to it.

And because it is one of those – long ago and far away stories –
it has the power to change the way we see some things in our lives –
maybe our relationships with God.

Let’s imagine Jacob trudging along the road -
burdened with regrets and misgivings.

He was lonely and uncomfortable - not so young anymore - and probably set in his ways.

Unlike his brother, Jacob was not a man who had spent much time in the wilderness.

The silence of the night probably held no comfort for him.

He was afraid Esau would learn of his abrupt departure and track him down.

His strength was certainly not equal to that of his hunter brother.

By this time, there was no alternative for him -

but to lie down upon the hard ground and use a stone as a pillow – and try to sleep.

Jacob slept. As he slept, he dreamed.

In his dream God appears and speaks to him.
Jacob sees stairs – and they go from where he is on the ground and extend into the heavens.
And on the staircase angels come and go.
Jacob recognizes the existence of a Will which was greater than his own ego.

§

Earlier in his life, when everything was going as he planned and expected,
a dream like this might not have happened.
Or, if it did, it might not have had the power to lift him to a higher consciousness.
Transforming experiences like this come more often when our conscious point of view
is suspended, like during illness, or a personal crisis
like Jacob is having.

Something bigger and more powerful was present – and Jacob could feel it.
God was in this spot – though Jacob had paid little attention to anything like this before.
So compelling is the scene, he calls it a gateway to heaven.
He marks the spot and calls it Bethel, which meant literally, the house of God.

Jacob's dream is one of those great images in the Old Testament -
often captured in liturgy and hymns.
We have it in our worship services.
Anyone know how Jacob's dream has been part of our worship?

*Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. I can feel his mighty power and his grace.
I can hear the brush of angels' wings, I see glory on each face;
surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.*

Or, a hymn you probably sang as children, that we will sing later in this worship –
"We are climbing Jacob's Ladder"

§

There is certainly more than one idea, thought, or lesson to take from this story.
I just want to lift up one.
And that is - that Jacob did not see anything until he was asleep -
but God had been present in his life all the time.

Asleep, Jacob suspended his usual state of mind, his ego, his defenses,
and became available.

Eckhart Tolle writes about this.¹

Eckhart Tolle is a philosopher and a mystic - clearly influenced by the teachings of Jesus.²
So much so that he renamed himself Eckhart after the medieval Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart.

Meister Eckhart said that we can all experience God directly.

That was controversial for the church at the time he was writing.

I expect this story of Jacob was important to Meister Eckhart.

Tolle tells us when we spend a lot of our energy and focus identifying with
what we think, or what we believe, or what we think we believe, or think about -

(He calls this *form*.)

we can miss the real essence of our spiritual traditions - and what they are trying to give us.

Perhaps we have this story of Jacob -
as a way to give us a picture of that awesome presence.

§

How do we want to receive it? What does it suggest for us?

That we might grow still - that we might even grow from our dreams?

That we are sometimes too filled with the world around us
that our spiritual vision is blurred?

Sometimes it's impossible to see God until we make ourselves quiet,
until we create moments when we are still and our minds are open,

when we can escape from ourselves,

our gains and losses, our egos and fears, in order to have the leisure God wants to give us.

We seldom take the time to be still and know that God is.

We schedule every waking moment and maintain a breakneck pattern of busyness.

Have you ever noticed how often we tell each other how busy we are?

How many here today stay busy and tell people about it?

What are we doing? What is that about?

Sometimes we are uncomfortable if we are not busy.

We even get anxious if there is too much silence between events of a worship service.

Some pastors try hard to be sure there are no lags or open spaces in the order of worship.

Others make sure there are.

We seldom take the time to be still and know that God is.

§

Great stories – Jacob's dream - is one of those great stories.

Perhaps some of us have had to flee something

and been alone and frightened - or just felt that way.

And then found an inner strength – a beckoning to a new future.

This story of Jacob reminds us it is possible –

not only the awesome presence of God –

but a vision for the future – that we might not be ready for otherwise.

Our story would not be here for us – if it had not stood the test of time -
if it had not connected with the life experience of people – like you and me.

And the spirit made known to Jacob – is surely in this place too.

And so, back to where we started – with story, poetry, and music
and their power to take us places we don't normally go.

Sometimes they give us a doorway, or even a staircase -

like Jacob's staircase – Jacob's ladder -

and an assurance and a joy that God wants to draw us into.

May this great story – stay with you

and not so much remind you - but keep you alive – let you feel the brush of angel's wings -

and the awesome presence - that is always there. Amen.

¹ *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*

² Christ Community Church e-zine article entitled *Much Ado About Tolle* by Ian Lawton