

April 26,2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Wrestling with an Inner Adversary
Genesis 32: 24-28



Dreams are letters from God sent to us to bring healing and wholeness. In these days of people reporting more active and vivid dreams, I am looking at some of the dreams from the Bible in our Sunday worship and following up with videos sharing ways to unlock our own dream letters from God.

Last week we met Jacob- an early faith ancestor of ours. His name, Jacob, means Grabby, and he was. He grabbed his brother's birthright. He grabbed his mother's favoritism. He grabbed and deceived and stole. Then his brother vowed to kill him and he ran and ran and ran. In a fitful night's sleep, he saw a ladder with gods' messengers ascending and descending. God spoke to Jacob in that dream and reminded Jacob- that God would be with him always. God would go with him and bring him home to the land promised his father.

In the biblical storyline where we read today, it's been twenty years since Jacob had the ladder dream. It's been twenty years since his brother vowed to kill him. Jacob is still running for his life. In these twenty years, he has married and had children. He now has two wives, Leah and Rachel. Jacob- who had deceived his own father - turned the tables and tricked his father-in-law as well. So, Jacob is on the run again only now he has two men hunting him down. He has taken his sister wives and all their children and quite a bit of his father-in-laws flocks and is headed towards home. His father-in-law is in hot pursuit.

As Jacob is headed back to home, his brother gets wind of the return and gathers his supporters to intercept and fulfill his twenty year old vow of revenge. Jacob doesn't want to be sandwiched between the two men trying to kill him. He will have to take on one at a time, so he begs his father-in-law forgiveness and makes an agreement to end their hostility, Jacob has battled one man on this day; he will face his brother tomorrow. He needs a good night's sleep to face the twenty year old anger and the army of men his brother has assembled.

Instead of counting sheep in peaceful slumber, Jacob wrestles all night long. He's not going to wake up refreshed and rested. Instead, he will wake exhausted, sweating with tired muscles and bones. He has wrestled with a powerful adversary.

Jacob is facing a twenty year old problem; twenty years ago he received a dream of support, encouragement. God said to Jacob- I am with you, I will never leave you; I will fulfill my promises to you. The younger Jacob was strengthened by that dream. The mature Jacob doesn't receive such a comforting message in this latter dream. Instead, he dreams of an adversary fighting him all night long. All night their weight is heavy, their breath is close, their bodies slam one another to the ground; his opponent smashes his face into the mud of the river bank. This is not a dream of peaceful angels on a ladder; it is struggle, wrestling, fighting. Young Jacob receive the dream he needed in his youth. Now older Jacob gets a tough lesson as he is now ready to face some truth about himself. Many dreams don't come until we are ready for them.

When this wrestling figure appears in Jacobs dream, Jacob has the courage to confront him. Oftentimes, if a scary figure appears in my dreams, I start running away. I've had dreams of being chased all night long, or so it seems. I awake exhausted, sweating like

I've ran a marathon -which I never have. I don't usually know why I am being chased, but my pursuer keeps chasing me, so I keep running. I thought that was the only option.

So, I was curious when in my training, I learned that we are everyone and everything in our dream. Everyone and everything in our dream is a part of us. So, if we dream about an adversary at work or a frightening figure we don't know, those are symbolic of some aspect of ourselves. Instead of running from the inner adversary of our dreams, our call is to face them and probe them for the messages they have for us. To turn toward them instead of run from the figure which raises our fear, and ask, what is it that you want to tell me? What is it that you have to teach me? Why are you here? Yes, you can talk to the characters in your dreams. You can even wrestle with them for their message. If you quit running away, the shadow figure quits chasing.

Our inner adversary is called our shadow. There to reveal truths to us. The *shadow* exists as part of the unconscious mind and is composed of our qualities and traits that we would rather ignore. Our shadow is all the repressed ideas, weaknesses, desires, instincts, and shortcomings and sometimes even our strengths that we are afraid to own. Thus, this archetype not only consists of all the things deemed unacceptable by society, but also those that are not aligned with one's own personal morals and values or comforts.

One of the wonderful things about dreams is that when we hear their message, we tend not to get defensive. The characters of our dreams can speak truth that we can more readily hear as our ego and defenses are out of the way. So we can hear what our shadow might say to us-if we dare to ask and have the courage to listen .

Jacob faced his inner adversary. He wrestled all night long with his inner shadow. It was hard, exhausting work. It is hard work to wrestle with our shadow and learn what it has to teach us.

At dawn, Jacob limps away, alive, and changed by the experience. Throughout this wrestling, Jacob has learned his true identity, and now he approaches his brother, Esau, with a different attitude. No longer is he the grabby brother, conniving and stealing, now he is conciliatory. He bows to the ground seven times seeking forgiveness from his brother whom he cheated. Esau who had once vowed to kill his brother, can see that Jacob is different instead of greeting him with the point of a sword, he embraces his brother and kisses him.

In the dark night of wrestling, God changed Jacob's name from Jacob (which means 'grabby one, or over-reacher') to Israel (which means 'one who wrestles with God'). The Jewish nation of his descendants would be called the Israelites, ones who wrestle with God to know their identity. It is the divine within us, struggling to take hold of us, who will transform us from greedy grabbers to divine givers. The Divine will struggle with us to get us to let go of a past that binds us in guilt, or struggles so that we might live into the divine which names us. In the times when Jacob truly thought he was all alone, Jacob found God was with him always to comfort and to challenge and to give new life.

In our struggle, we too can find within us, wrestling with us to free us from that which would hold us back from new life and whole living.

Alleluia, Amen.