

Covenant Word

Living the Dream

Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 7:15-20 (*The Message*);
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Living the dream! We want this for young people who are full of optimism and fervor – who are out to change the world and dare to believe they can. What does living the dream mean to you? Is it pursuing your wildest hopes; living into opportunities to make them your own; receiving the long awaited promotion; sharing a life-time with someone you love and who loves you in return? Living the dream is, quite literally, what we witness unfolding in scripture over and over again. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Dreaming the Truth," p. 103)

First there was Abraham living the dream of descendants as he counted the stars in the night sky. Next came Jacob, with his dream of a ladder. Then there is Joseph with his sheaves of dreams. In the New Testament, we meet up with another Joseph, husband of Mary, who dreamed of his holy family while being visited by Magi who listened to their dreams and so went home by another way. All dreamers. All believers with the sure confidence that God is closer than we think, meeting us wherever we are on earth with the gates of Heaven.

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
July 23, 2017*

Graduation day turned out to be cold and damp. We wore sweatshirts as we loaded the last of Dannelly's things into the car. He wore his cap and gown as we walked across campus to Coleman Coliseum. If all those ribbons around his neck didn't distinguish him, the red mortarboard did. I was proud. It was one of those parents' best moments. "Nothing can top this," I thought to myself. Nothing that it is until I watched Dannelly

cross the stage and in front of God and everybody, President Stuart Bell called him by name, and threw his arms around our son in congratulations. At that moment, Lloyd squeezed my hand and put his head next to mine to whisper, "Dan Shelton is living the dream!"

We have been in a sort of limbo since. Coming home to a house that has accommodated for his absence, there is now no space to accommodate for his presence! His stuff is EVERYWHERE! Fulfilling requirements for a master's degree, his online economics class is all over the dining room table. His online statistics class is all over the kitchen counter, and the things waiting to return to Tuscaloosa are filling the basement! His International business class requires travel. So on Wednesday of this past week, Dannelly loaded his suitcase and backpack into Lloyd's car. We took off for Atlanta to put him on a plane to Delhi, India where he would arrive a mere 17 1/2 hours later. We pulled up to the curb at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, gave hugs all around and promptly left. As we pulled away, I said to Lloyd, "I feel the same way I did when I took him to Kindergarten." Lloyd squeezed my hand and said, "Oh, Dan Shelton is just fine. He is living the dream."

What does living the dream mean to you? Is it pursuing your wildest hopes; living into opportunities to make them your own; receiving the long awaited promotion; sharing a life-time with someone you love and who loves you in return?

We read the scriptural text and quietly admit to ourselves that God must not do this anymore. Isn't this an explanation of a primitive people living in simpler times? God doesn't whisper in our ears now to speak words of comforting promise...or does God? We may be confused about this for two reasons. One is we are too busy to listen. We are engaged in leading, managing, ministering, feeding, teaching, fixing, pleasing, cleaning, parenting our children and parenting our parents. When was the last time you fled to a lonely place with nothing to pull on your spirit but the slow passage of stars in a night sky?

Another problem with dreams is our personal sense of unworthiness. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "I know that nothing good dwells in me." If this is the case, then why would God choose to appear in my dreams? If today's story about Jacob is any indicator, we can have our hopes renewed, for we are people, not

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

matter how failed we may be, who are set apart by God to live the dream.

You will remember from last week that Esau and Jacob are the twin sons of Rebekah and Isaac. There is no easy give and take between the two. Rather, there is intense rivalry. The tension erupts when Jacob, catching Esau at a moment of extreme vulnerability, trades a bowl of stew for Esau's inheritance. The trickery doesn't end there, however, for Jacob also deceives their father, Isaac. Rebekah disguises Jacob, so that he feels and smells like his brother Esau. And so, father Isaac, blinded by cataracts and favoritism, believes that he is blessing Esau when in truth, he is blessing Jacob. When Esau finds out, he goes into a rage, for once a blessing is given, it cannot be undone. Scripture says, "Esau hated his brother Jacob." And then, out loud for everyone to hear, Esau vows: "The day our father dies, I am going to kill my brother." Jacob, therefore, flees for his life. He is on the run, banished from his home, separated from his family, and all due to his deception and deceit.

It is important to remember that Jacob was the child who loved being at home – reading, cooking in the kitchen, listening to the comings and goings of the clan. Esau is the son with all the skills to survive in the woods. If I were betting on which one would win that TV show, Survivor, all my money would be on Esau! So with Jacob out in the wilderness, we should be concerned. He's away from home for the first time in his life, and his brother has put a contract out for his life. Ohhhh, Jacob has made a mess of things and as the sun sets, he is feeling utterly alone, weighted down by the burden of his misdeeds.

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Now I have some sympathy for Jacob here. I remember what it was like to be at Camp Winnataska that first night in a cabin full of children I did not know and without the comfort of my own bed. The cabins didn't smell right; my parents were not in the next room; and all the night's noises came right through the screens that acted as windows. But I did not suffer from deception or being on the outs with my family. So I get conflicted when it comes to Jacob, because this man chosen by God to give birth to nations, God's chosen people, is a liar, a trickster and a deceiver. Jacob would not have been my choice for an ancestor of the faith tradition. If left to me, I would have taken his name off the list of potential candidates. His resume would have landed in file 13.

Imparting such judgment has me sounding a lot like the servants in Jesus' parable found in Matthew's gospel. You see, there was a farmer who had planted a beautiful field of wheat. But even though he used the best of seed and gave the best of care, into that farmer's field, there also grew weeds, "tares" some translations say and yet others call it "darnel." If you know your weeds, technically

what grew there is *lolium temulentum*. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Learning to Live with Weeds," *Seeds of Heaven*) It looks like wheat, but its little black seeds are poisonous causing blindness and even death. Sort of like some of our decisions. They seem like great fun in the beginning but end up being poisonous, creating spiritual blindness and are deadly to the soul in the end.

And so the farmer's servants realize the danger of such a crop. It is dangerous to those who will consume the wheat, but it is, oh, so dangerous to their reputations that should someone else see the field full of weeds, they will think the caregivers are not just lazy, they are reckless. So they want to go out in the field and use their expert judgment. They want to pull up the bad weeds to give the good wheat plenty of room to grow.

Before the eager servants can get into the fields for a long day of sweat equity, the farmer says "Wait just a minute. I'm grateful you want to improve on my plan, but I don't trust your judgment." The farmer knows that it is hard to tell a good plant from a bad one; that sometimes we mistake climbing roses for kudzu or day lilies for wild monkey grass. We are not much smarter about ourselves or other people either. We are quick to judge, as if we are sure we know the difference not just between wheat and

tares, but between who is worthy and who is not. We itch to be turned loose with our machetes! There is no telling who we might chop down, and who we will spare. Meaning to be good servants, we go out to do battle with the weeds and end up standing in a pile of wheat. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

And so the farmer, that extravagant sower from last week, gives good advice. "Leave the weeds and wheat alone. Let them grow together." He's not after a neat field. As the owner of the field, he is willing to risk fat weeds for fat wheat...the bad mixed in with the good. His decision helps us recognize the co-mingling of positive and negative virtue not only in others, but also in the field we know as ourselves. It is what Paul is talking about when he says: "I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I

want. I do the very thing I hate." It is clearly the struggle we see occurring within Jacob.

As dusk gives way to dark, Jacob pushes ahead to a flat place that is surrounded by stones. Choosing one for protection and one for a pillow, Jacob lies down. He is exhausted from running away. He is exhausted by the shenanigans in his family. He is exhausted by fear of Esau, and fear of being alone in the wild. And so he falls in to a deep sleep where dreams often catch us off guard in their vividness and prophetic conviction.

Jacob dreams of a ladder, stairs that act as a connecting place between this world and heaven. Angels are ascending and descending on the ladder with God standing at the top. If the Dream-Giver makes mistakes, this surely looks like one to me. Jacob has so many weeds in his field, how can God even see the wheat? But God, never defined by human judgment and expectation, bends over Jacob...this fugitive on the run from his own misdeeds and guilt...and God gives promises:

I am with you.

I will keep you wherever you go.

I will bring you home.

I will not leave you.

God does not wait for Jacob to come to some sacred altar in a holy sanctuary with humility and grief over his actions. No! God comes right to where Jacob is, and God holds nothing back. Just when we think a brief word of encouragement would be sufficient, God tucks everything into this thief's pocket, just like God does in ours!

I am with you.

I will keep you wherever you go.

I will bring you home.

I will not leave you.

"Now Pastor," you may be thinking. "We are a people schooled in science and philosophy. We know the difference between fact and fantasy. In order to live the dream, we give ourselves over to work. We put in long hours. We keep good records. We produce measurable results. We can add up our facts and write them down!"

My friends, if it makes you feel better, go ahead and keep that record of your achievements, and after a 13-hour day, limp home and tuck them under your pillow. When you finally fall into

bed and try to close your eyes, what haunts you? Take inventory of what is there keeping you company, just like it kept Jacob company. Are you out of options and ideas? Has all of your conniving fallen through? Has your luck run out? Are you a refugee of your own wrecked economy? (Barba Brown Taylor)

If this is where you find yourself, don't be surprised then when the ragged curtain of your sleep gets drawn aside and a warm breath makes the hairs on your arms stand up on end. Because it is when we are in the middle of nowhere, all alone with

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only a stone for a pillow, that the dream will touch down. God is suddenly right where you are...bringing the gates of heaven right where you are...and God is saying:

I am with you.

I will keep you wherever you go.

I will bring you home.

I will not leave you.

This is the only dream we are called to live, and I pray that when we do, that others will take notice. That they will reach over to squeeze the hand of someone nearby and will remark: "Look at those folks down there at Baptist Church of the Covenant, they sure are living the dream."

May it be so, Lord, may it be so, amen.

God is suddenly right where you are... bringing the gates of heaven right where you are...and God is saying:

I am with you.

I will keep you wherever you go.

I will bring you home.

I will not leave you.