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Genesis 31:1-21
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Hearing God through Dreams, Visions, Angels, and the Unconscious

Julian of Norwich lived in 14th Century England through many seasons of bubonic plague. At the age of 31 in 1373, she was on the brink of death and received her last rites. But during her illness, she received a series of visions of Jesus and was miraculously healed. Julian went on to write a book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, about these mystical visions and was the first English book written by a woman.

Soon afterward, she became part of an early monastic community called The Anchorites which was a religious person who withdrew from society like a sort of hermit and literally anchored themselves to the church. Julian lived out her remaining days in a little concrete cell, “anchored” to the side of St. Julian’s Church in Norwich. Hence her name.

This cell had three simple windows. One through which she received food and daily needs like emptying her chamber pot. Another window looked out to the world where she could receive visitors and give counsel. And yet another window looked inside the church which allowed her to participate in worship and receive communion. People flocked for her spiritual wisdom.

Pete Greig writes, “Julian’s writing is mystical and marked profoundly by a message of God’s all-encompassing love.” In one of her visions, she saw Jesus as the host of a party in his heavenly house. As she watched Jesus, she noted how “courteously and companionably, Jesus greeted and delighted his friends with love shining from his face like a marvelous melody that has no end.” This was in contrast to the way Jesus was often portrayed through the arts of her day which was earnestly, bored, or mildly angry.¹

But the truth is that scripture is full of stories where God spoke to people through all sorts of inexplicable ways such as dreams, visions, angels, and the unconscious. That is what we wrestle with today as learn how to hear God ourselves. Abraham Lincoln himself once said, “If we believe the Bible, we must accept the fact that, in the old days, God and his angels came to men in their sleep and made themselves known in dreams.”

Our scripture story is one such encounter. Isaac and Rebecca’s son Jacob had a series of dreams where he encountered God directly. He was married to Rachel and Leah who were daughters of Laban. Laban had tricked Jacob several times as

¹ Pete Greig, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 187-189.

he waited seven years to take Rachel as his wife. At their marriage, Laban actually tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, Laban's older daughter first. Then Laban conned Jacob out of another seven years of work in order to marry Rachel. The vision Jacob had was how God would repay Jacob for this trickery from Laban's own livestock.

Please join me as we see how this story unfolds in Genesis 31:1-21.

31 Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father."

2 And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been.

3 Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."

4 So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were. **5** He said to them, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. **6** You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, **7** yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me. **8** If he said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young. **9** So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me.

10 "In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. **11** The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' **12** And he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. **13** I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.'"

14 Then Rachel and Leah replied, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? **15** Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. **16** Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you."

17 Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, **18** and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

19 When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods. **20** Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. **21** So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Dreams, Visions, Angels, and the Unconscious. Oh my! We are stepping in to mystical territory that our modern rational minds would rather have nothing to do with. And yet, as I mentioned, the Bible is laden with such stories.

What I aim to do this morning is to look at this story more in-depth to notice how God spoke to Jacob through various ways. Then we'll consider a very brief survey of other examples in the Bible where we see these some sort of things happening. And finally, we'll grab a few tools that Pete Greig mentions in his book, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People*.

First, let's look at Jacob's story in more depth.

After being tricked twice by his future father-in-law, Jacob had a dream that led him to strike a deal for the wages that he was owed after having worked for Laban for fourteen years. The deal was this...Jacob would go throughout Laban's flock and pick out all the lambs and goats that were speckled, spotted, dark colored or streaked. In other words, Jacob would take the minority flock. Laban would get the majority.

Now "typically an ancient shepherding contract was a share of between ten to twenty percent of the flock along with a percentage of the wool and milk by-products. So really Jacob was giving Laban the much better deal."²

What Laban didn't account for was how Jacob's shrewd shepherding would encourage the mating of his animals over and above Laban's animals. So Jacob's flocks grew exceedingly as did the number of his maidservants and manservants, camels and donkeys. That's bible talk for Jacob became very rich. And Laban and his sons took notice of Jacob's wealth and became very jealous. Isn't it funny how sometimes money skews the way we look at people within a family?

So the first way that God spoke to Jacob was through his dream. And a good test on whether or not a dream was from God, is to ask, "Did it come true?"

The second way that God spoke to Jacob was through an angel in his dream. Oftentimes in the Old Testament when people have a theophany or encounter with God, God calls them by name. "Jacob." To which the person responds, "Here I am" or *heneni* in Hebrew.

Notice that there is no differentiation between the angel and God, himself. As the angel begins to speak, the angel refers to itself as "I am the God of Bethel." Bethel was place where Jacob earlier had his famous dream of a stairway resting on earth but reaching to the heavens. On this stairway, angels ascended and descended on it. Then God introduced himself to Jacob, promised to give him the

² *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, See footnote on Genesis 30:32 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), pg 51

land on which he was lying, increase the number of his offspring, and to be with Jacob wherever he went.³

In this particular dream that we heard today, God reminded Jacob of those promises.

The third way that God spoke to Jacob was through his senses. Jacob had overheard what his brothers-in-law were saying about him and his wealth. Certainly a bit of jealous crept into that perspective. And Jacob further noticed, either consciously or unconsciously, that his father-in-law's attitude toward him also changed. Maybe you could say that Jacob had this intuitive sense that he was not as welcome around Laban's family as he once was and it was time to head out on his own. I guess we could say, Jacob trusted his "gut" on this decision.

The fourth way that God spoke to Jacob was through his wives. Notice how Jacob shared with both Rachel and Leah how God had spoken to him about his flock's explosive growth. They too sensed that their father's and brothers' perspectives had changed toward them. "Does not our father regard us as foreigners and sold us as property? We are fully on board with you, Jacob. Let's get out of here![my paraphrasing]"

Sometimes God speaks to us is through the counsel of wise and Godly people. It is really important before making significant life decisions that we bounce our ideas off people we can trust. Without going into too much detail, share the generalities of your thinking, and then sit back and listen to what these people have to say. Does it confirm what you are thinking about, or does it contradict? Either could be ways that God speaks to us.

And this is just one story out of many in the Bible where God speaks to people through dreams, visions, angels, and the unconscious. Other places in scripture include the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, and his dream about how his older brothers would one day bow down to him. They didn't like that. So they sold him into slavery in Egypt. Then he became known as a dream interpreter in Egypt for Pharaoh.

Pete Greig writes, there was "Gideon's unlikely victory over the Midianites foreshadowed by a dream (Judges 7). King Solomon encountered God in a dream and asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3). Isaiah was given his calling by God in a dramatic visionary experience (Isaiah 6). The prophet Daniel received and interpreted dreams throughout his long and spectacularly influential life in Babylon (Daniel 2:28)."⁴

In the New Testament, Jesus' birth is filled with dreams and visits from angels. Mary received confirmation from her cousin Elizabeth that her expected

³ Genesis 28:11-22

⁴ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 170.

child was from God. Saul was converted to faith in Christ through a vision of Jesus. And we recently learned how an angel spoke to both the Roman Centurion Cornelius and the Apostle Peter about bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles.

And these are just a few of the examples. In the Gospels alone, there are fifty-one references to angels.⁵

None of this should surprise us. For the Prophet Joel said, “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”⁶

So we should expect God to speak to us, even today, through dreams, visions, angels, and the unconscious. But how can we trust that what we are hearing is actually from God and not something that we’ve made up in our minds?

Let me suggest a few tools that Pete Greig mentions in his book.

First, ask God for dreams. Now, I confess that I am not a person who often remembers specifics about my dreams. But, Greig suggests that if you have a dream where you think God might be speaking to you, keep a notepad next to your bed. If you should wake up from your dream. Write it down so that you do not forget it. It may or not make sense at the moment. That’s ok. Just sit with it for a while.

Second, pray that God would help you to interpret your dreams. Pete Greig says, “We will never understand dreams and visions until we ask God to give us insight.”⁷

Third, ask Godly people that you know and trust what they think the dream or vision might be about.

Fourth, Greig suggests employing what he calls the ABC filter.

A...is the dream or vision affirming?

B...is the dream or vision biblical?

C...is the dream or vision Christlike?

Fifth, listen to your personal conscience or simple common sense. “God will guide us in particular through the inner whisper of our conscience.”⁸

And finally sixth, we should never forget that Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit who would be with us always and would help us understand what God is trying to say.

⁵ Ibid, 171.

⁶ Joel 2:28-29

⁷ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 178.

⁸ Ibid, 183.

I want to close with sharing a dream that I once had that directly impacted all of us here today.

While I was searching for a call during seminary, there were several opportunities in Washington that I pursued. Truth be told, there was a church in the Puget Sound area that I was certain was the right fit. It was close to our family and friends. It was right off a Navy base where I could employ my naval experience. I resonated well with their ministry, mission, and Pastoral Nominating Committee. Everything seemed perfect.

At the same time, I was also in communication with the Pastoral Nominating Committee here at Cascades. The church was much smaller. Vancouver was uncharted territory for me. But the big downside was that Cascades was just recovering from having dissolved the call with their previous pastor and that typically is not a situation that a new pastor wants to follow.

As it turned out, I was invited to preach at neutral pulpits for both Pastoral Nominating Committees over two consecutive weekends. For those who may not be familiar with the call process in the Presbyterian Church, the congregation elects a committee from among the congregation who reviews resumes, interviews candidates and narrows the search to two or three final candidates who are then invited to preach at neutral pulpit at nearby churches. The pastoral nominating committee observes what each candidates are like in the pulpit and then offers a call to one candidate who they will present to the congregation. Then the candidate preaches before the congregation and the congregation votes immediately afterwards to extend the call or not.

Both weekends went very well. Both were ready to offer me positions.

The church up north was very formal and professional like.

Cascades was very warm, friendly, like being part of a family.

When we went back home to Princeton, Karen and I were conflicted about which call to accept.

I spoke with a couple pastor mentors of mine. I made a thorough list of pros and cons for each call. It was really hard to decide.

Finally, one night I had a dream. I cannot say exactly the details of that dream, but I distinctly remember waking up and saying, "We are supposed to go to Cascades" even though many of my markers were hitting in the direction of the other church.

That next morning, I called the PNC here at Cascades and accepted the call and immediately withdrew my name from the other church. Both were shocked. But Karen and I knew in our hearts that we were making the right decision.

That was 18 years ago this past May!

Was this dream affirming? Yes. It both affirmed my call to ministry and confirmed my decision about where God was calling me to serve.

Was it biblical? Yes. I had asked God for wisdom and James the brother of Jesus wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, they should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to them.”⁹

Was it Christlike? Yes. It required stepping out in faith.

So may we be attentive to our dreams, visions, angels, and the gift of our unconscious as we seek to hear God’s voice. May we pursue the wisdom of trusted, Godly people who will help us interpret what God might be saying. And when we hear God speak, may we be like Jacob who stepped out in faith responded, “heneni” or “Here I am Lord!”

⁹ James 1:5