

Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it

Dale Pauls

Some of the finest stories in Scripture are the ancient ones, and among the best is that of Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-17). Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, Jacob, the Trickster extraordinaire (a stock-in-trade motif of stories everywhere), is fleeing from his brother Esau. He comes to "a certain place" one night and sleeps there out in the open using a stone as a pillow. And he has a remarkable dream. He dreams that a ladder, better yet, a stairway or a ramp like those attached to temple towers (ziggurats) back then, reached from heaven down to where he was sleeping. Messengers (angels) from God were ascending and descending. In the dream God confirmed his promises to Abraham now to Jacob, the grandson: the land, many descendants, the ways all peoples on earth would come to be blessed, and that God, Yahweh, would be with him, and watch over him wherever he went, and would one day bring him back to this place.

So there on an ordinary night, in a place with no name, with a stone for a pillow, Jacob sees that the way to heaven is wide open, and he says (in verse 16), "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." And the place he names Bethel, literally "the house of God," and the stone he sets up as a sacred pillar and consecrates with oil. What was ordinary, he now sees as sacred. And if he is still in flight, he now sees that his journey is sacred.

With this, we are very close to what spiritual people from all around the world know: that we are all on a journey; that dreams matter; that we are surrounded by the sacred; and that God comes to us when we least expect him. God is right here. Think of a fourth dimension in which we live and move and have our being. With our 3-D habits of perception, we cannot quite see it. But sometimes we catch a glimpse. The curtain of appearances parts. We sense the breath of God. Right here. Right now. "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

MAYBE it's listening to the Atlantic pounding the shores of Martha's Vineyard.

MAYBE it's in an unexpected kindness we receive.

MAYBE it's in the glee of a two-year-old who knows that he is deeply loved.

MAYBE it's in the glow that surrounds a bride at her wedding.

MAYBE it's in a dream at night that we sense was not quite like other dreams.

MAYBE it's reading in a tradition very different from your own and finding a breakthrough insight.

MAYBE it's when words come to us when we have none of our own.

MAYBE it's in a deep spiritual friendship.

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” And we know then what wise people have always known – that all around us is sacred reality. And now knowing this, we begin to see the simple joys, all the simple gifts that God has surrounded us with and given us.

I think of Louis Armstrong's “What a Wonderful World.” You know the feeling that comes over you when you hear this song. That feeling can be yours. Even after all the hard knocks of life, all the loss, all the fear, all the ways society tries to spook us, all the things we have done wrong and all the things we have misunderstood, it is still:

I see trees of green, red roses too,
I see them bloom for me and you,
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white,
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night,
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.

The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people goin' by,
I see friends shakin' hands, sayin', “How do you do!”
They're really sayin', “I love you.”

I hear babies cry, I watch them grow.
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know.
And I think to myself,
What a wonderful world.

The secret to happiness, the secret to life itself, is to find the beauty in everyday life: in a child's smile, in the sky at sunset or just as the morning sun comes up over the Connecticut hills, in the gentle wisdom of a friend, trees blossoming in springtime, a satisfying meal, the pleasure of movement, red roses in bloom, the colors of the rainbow, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night.

The secret to good life is: to hear the music of the universe everywhere you go; to find satisfaction in the company of the people around you; to see in ordinary things and minds and lives the sacred; to realize that there is beauty and meaning and truth and love and mystery in the world at all times and under all circumstances; that, as Jacob dreamed that night, the gate of heaven is always open. “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”

The secret to happiness comes down to knowing: that God is always coming to us bearing gifts; that almost everything that really matters in life is God's gift to us; that God loves us and has equipped us for every challenge; that nothing can happen to us that God has not made us strong enough to face. Nothing can happen to us that God has not given us the resources – call them spiritual gifts – to see us through. We will be all right. Whatever happens we will be all right. It really, really is a wonderful world.

We are invited to enter a world open to the Spirit of God. And now we can trust the flow of our lives whatever happens. We will live every day surrounded by grace, and with this heightened state of consciousness, we will see so much more than we ever thought possible and we will be able to do so much more than we ever imagined.

We are called then to stop and look and see, to pull out from living on automatic, our minds cluttered with noise and shrouded by fear, oblivious to what God is doing all around us, and to realize over and over and over again that “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” God is right here. In God we live and move and have our being. What we sometimes catch just glimpses of is real. Behind the curtain of appearances, the sacred story goes on. A never-ending story. A joyful story. Just waiting for you to enter it.

– Dale Pauls