

If anyone deserved a sleepless night, it was Jacob. But the book of Genesis tells us that Jacob came to a certain place on his journey toward Haran, “and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place” (28:11). His heart rate and blood pressure increased. His arm and leg muscles became temporarily paralyzed. His brain activity became like it was during wakefulness. And Jacob began to dream.

Jacob dreamed of a ladder that stretched from earth to heaven. The angels of God were “ascending and descending on it” (v. 12). It was a weird dream, but it carried a message. The Lord stood beside Jacob in the dream and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring” (v. 13). God promised that Jacob’s offspring would be numerous, spreading throughout the earth, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed in Jacob and in his offspring.

Then God concluded with the words, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (v. 15).

When we track Jacob’s sleep, we make important discoveries about the nature of our God. Jacob’s dream reveals that **God wants a relationship with us**. The ladder between heaven and earth is a clear sign that God is not content to rule the universe from some distant, heavenly height but wants to be connected to us.

This desire for a relationship was seen first when Adam and Eve “heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Genesis 3:8). God’s longing for a close connection was seen most clearly when the word of God “became flesh and lived among us” as Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Jacob’s dream reveals that God intends to be with us, not distant from us, entering the very center of human life, in all its complexities and difficulties.

Jacob’s dream tells us that **God comes to us in grace, not in judgment**. If anyone deserved to be judged for his sins, it was Jacob. He took advantage of his older brother when Esau was weak with hunger, offering bread and lentil stew in exchange for his birthright (Genesis 25:29-34). Jacob disguised himself as Esau to receive their father’s blessing (Genesis 27:1-29).

Yet, when God appeared to Jacob, God offered him gracious gifts of land and numerous offspring. Jacob’s dream shows that God gives us what we need, not what we deserve. God’s grace is fully revealed in Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16). In Jesus, God gave us what we needed (forgiveness and redemption) not what we deserved (punishment and death for our sins).

God also promises to be with us wherever we go, and to remain faithful to us. The name Immanuel means “God is with us,” a name first spoken by the prophet Isaiah (7:14) and later attached to Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:23). God never leaves us or abandons us, but stays close beside us, through all our pains and struggles and failures. Although we sometimes fall away from God, the Lord never falls away from us. “I will not leave you,” says God to Jacob, “until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15). Jacob’s dream assures us that God is by our side, perfectly faithful to us.

This is especially important for us to remember right now: God is with us, always, even amid a pandemic and civil unrest. It is fitting for us to seek the signs that God is with us – in a dream, in a kind word, in a helpful neighbor – and to claim the promise of God’s faithfulness.

Genesis tells us that when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!” (v. 16). He discovered in his dream that God was far closer than he ever imagined, and that the place of his sleeping was “the house of God” and the “gate of heaven” (v. 17). Then Jacob called the place “Bethel,”

which means “House of God” (v. 19). Jacob invites us to respond to his dream by seeing and accepting that God is with us.

This story makes clear that the life of faith is not all about frantic activity. Jacob sensed the presence of God when he was sleeping, not when he was working. He discovered the house of God and the gate of heaven when he was sitting still, not running around. We, too, can move closer to God by caring for our bodies, by taking time to rest, and by getting enough sleep. We discover that the Lord is near when we stop our relentless activity and allow ourselves to dream and to rest in God.

God wants to be part of your life. God offers you grace. God promises to be with you always. These are the truths of Jacob’s dream, and they will be true for you if you take the time to be still and know that God is with you. As you slow down and accept this truth, let it sink in far enough that it will remain true through the busy months that lie ahead. Remember that part of the value of deep sleep is that it allows for “memory consolidation and stabilization.”

In these slower summer days, consolidate the memory of Jacob’s dream and your own experience of God’s presence and God’s grace. Stabilize these beliefs so that they will remain real and strong as you face the challenges of the days to come. Take the time to be still, to rest, to dream. When you do, you will move closer to God.

Sources:

- Leech, Joe. “10 Reasons Why Good Sleep Is Important.” *Healthline*, June 29, 2018, www.healthline.com.
- Stone, Maddie. “Does My Smartwatch’s Sleep Tracker Actually Do Anything?” *Gizmodo*, October 9, 2019, <https://gizmodo.com>.

Jacob the Sleep-Tracker

Sunday, July 19, 2020

Genesis 28:10-19a

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Everyone knows that diet and exercise are important to good health. So is sleep. Miss a good night’s sleep, and you run the risk of gaining weight, becoming depressed, and increasing your chances of heart disease and stroke. Besides, writes journalist Maddie Stone, you need sleep “in order not to feel like garbage the next day.”

Sometimes the healthiest activity is *no activity*. Just stop working and go to bed! Recently, a whole industry has grown up around the importance of getting a good night’s sleep. Popular sleep-trackers such as Fitbit and the Oura Ring can provide insight into how well you sleep at night.

Of special importance is REM sleep, in which you experience rapid eye movement. In this sleep stage, your heart rate and blood pressure increase. Your arm and leg muscles become temporarily paralyzed. Most interesting of all: Your brain activity becomes like what is seen in wakefulness. This is the stage in which you are most likely to dream. According to Maddie Stone, “Research suggests that REM and deep sleep together play an important role in memory consolidation and stabilization.” Skimp on your sleep and you are going to miss some valuable dream time; time when your brain does very important work.

Jacob was a dreamer. One of the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob lived a very stressful life. In particular, he was locked in a bitter sibling rivalry with his twin brother Esau. First, Jacob tricked his father to receive the blessing that was destined for his brother. Then, when Esau made plans to murder his sneaky brother, Jacob fled toward the city of Haran to escape Esau’s fury.