

"Refugees' Dream"

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As a Hospital Chaplain, I visited mentally ill patients in the Behavioral Health unit. In those visits, I heard stories of hallucinations, dreams, and fearful stories of persecution.

Having myself struggled with depression, I try to divert the patients with fears toward a focus on what is good rather than what is dark and fearful on what is hopeful rather than what brings dread.

In that effort, I believe I am engaging the spiritual in the person, to reinterpret extreme tensions inside the individual into meaningful challenges to serve something greater than ourselves.

One spiritually-immobilized patient I met with admitted to seeing waking visions of animals in cages moving along a railroad track. After some give and take, I learned that the patient was concerned with environmental destruction where animals lost their habitat to human use. We discussed some opportunities for the patient to work in conservation. The vision, which terrified the patient, was instead reinterpreted into a commitment for more profound engagement with the world. We never discussed God.

But I believe ours was a religious exchange because it took the symbols of the unconscious and interpreted them for wholeness and earthly betterment.

Today's reading from scripture details the most famous dream of the Bible, Jacob's dream of the ladder between heaven and earth with messenger-angels ascending and descending from heaven at its apex.

It isn't an expected view of how heaven and earth are connected. We humans expect that earth climbs to heaven from our own achievements—that we earn a relationship with heaven and God through our own efforts.

The symbolism of Jacob's dream suggests the reverse, that heaven is linked with earth through God's initiative—that that initiative engages humans with a choice: to convert to the One God and engage with living history, or to maintain one's prior life in the form of self-serving denial and avoidance of purpose.

The Talmud of the ancient Jewish rabbis states that "A dream uninterpreted is a letter unread," and I intend to read this letter from God to us in the form of the Biblical Dream of Jacob at Bethel. I believe that we can discover even in this archaic religiosity of dream interpretation a spirituality of commitment and personal and social action to how God is dealing with Jacob the nomad, Israel the refugee.

The nomad spirituality of the Bedouin Jacob included the interpretation of dreams as a way that God communicates with God's people. God speaks in this dream of Jacob symbolically because God speaks and acts consistently, using imagery in the message God intends for us.

God says to Jacob, “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; 14and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.”

These words of God must agree with the imagery and the symbolism of the ladder of ascending and descending angels. God speaks of human history, the offspring of the earth west, east, north and south, so that the movement of the angels corresponds to historical movements, in a code of movements. God stands beside Jacob so as to describe his future as a nomad, Israel as a diaspora refugee. The book of Daniel details an angel of the Persians and an angel of the Greeks. These angels are spiritual epitomes of the social structure and social organization of peoples.

In other words, the active laddering of the national angels is the historical dynamism of ethnic peoples as they ebb and flow upon the face of the lands. This is my interpretation of the dream’s symbolism—as a believer in Providence’s grand dynamic reorientation of ethnic power on the earth. I believe that the text speaks of all of human history bound up in Israel’s coming and going.

Historical Palestine is a migratory melting pot, with nomadic and military comings and goings, the code of movement specially signified at its ritual heart, Bethel in Jacob’s day even before Jerusalem at the time of David.

Jacob’s travel speaks to a near universal human condition, that of the refugee. The travelogue of Jacob is both national and personal. It speaks of Jacob’s fleeing from his father Isaac and brother Esau at the counsel of his mother Rebekkah, while it also speaks of Israel’s national exile from the Promised Land in Egypt and Babylon.

This personal and national character of the refugee’s flight in both the archaic dream narrative and travel narrative of Israel suggest that there is something characteristic in God’s action on the earth—an action of God that meets the fugitive and the refugee on their flight and brings on a task for those meeting them.

I believe that this story of Jacob’s dream shows something essential about God Godself: that God reaches out to the refugee because it is in God’s nature to rescue the fugitive, especially the refugee from human politics and human injustice. God is a helper—a guide of fugitives from human perversions of peace and justice.

For Jacob to flee the tents into the wilderness for safety, we can presume that Jacob’s worldview has come crashing down. What he believed mattered most—cunning, intelligence, domesticity—has instead been shown by events to be dangerous. As Jacob settles down to a hardscrabble bed that third night out from the tents in the wilderness at Luz—making a pillow of stone for his head—his is a broken grandiosity; He is a broken man, ready for the purifying action of conversion to another way.

I believe that the narrative of Jacob suggests that God reaches out to the refugee in a way that demands a response. That response is conversion in both word and deed.

And Jacob does indeed convert. He wakes up from his dream with a holy fear and acknowledges that even in this Godforsaken place, God is. Jacob's first words on awakening startle him into a new consciousness—"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." It was the beginning of a new life. Fear followed on surprise. Yet Jacob had the renewable stuff of a man in him. Jacob converts by his words, and then he undertakes two actions, one stereotyped and the other existential.

Jacob anoints the stone of his bedding-down with oil and sets it up as a memorial to his astonishment that God is even in this place; that God is present outside of civilization in wilderness! Jacob calls the stone Beth-El, the House of God. This act is stereotyped in that any pagan of that age might have done this. But then Jacob does something that suggests that his character is developing. He makes the first recorded vow in the Bible: to tithe from all that God will give him going forward.

Jacob's conversion is thus existential: it signals a change in his character from being self-concerned to being focused on God and concerned with others' welfare. It is the beginning of a long, purifying conversion and growth in character whereby Jacob learns patience, humility, courage, gratitude and commitment to family.

Jacob allows himself to act as a Patriarch to the whole of human history concerned with virtue: he commits to family creation, social generosity, and divine veneration. Jacob has begun to set aside his peculiar blend of self-love and nihilism in the desert at Beth-El.

In this personal narrative of the refugee, we discover a model of conversion and purification. Refugees in their movement undergo constant reorientations to civil and earthly power that is terrifying, but in their committed sojourning, they are purified by trust in a higher power and a higher ground.

God reaches out to the distressed and the displaced and presents the opportunity to convert to God and commit to a future destiny, all in the crucible of changing ethnic and national grids of power.

Migration is a fountain of humiliation. Lawrence Mala Ali, a refugee Syrian engineer who recently arrived in Norway said, "Lebanon is the capital of humiliation. I chose Europe because it's the only possible place that makes me feel that I am a man again."

As we look to the 45-50 million refugees in the contemporary world stage—Four million have fled Syria since 2011—we might note that they are fleeing hard conditions at home, like Jacob's flight from Esau, and that they face exploitation in their temporary camps as they seek to eke out a living.

It seems to me that the refugees' plight is one of forsakenness and exploitation as they undergo the rigors of alienation, as Jacob's refugee story suggests. The ongoing reorientation to power may indeed make refugees humble and purified, making them perhaps the favored of God.

Almost 1% of the world's population is made up of refugees, and with forecasts that the world will grow by 3 billion more people in the next 40 years, to 9 billion, there will be economic, political, and environmental instability that likely brings a growth in the both the number of refugees and the severity of their traumas. If we take the old, old story and its message seriously, we should conclude that God favors the refugee and goes forth to meet them on the road. In one example of that, our Presbyterian denomination participates in relief work through its Church World Service to relieve humanitarian crises in the camps, and a refugee crisis in Europe unknown for the last 70 years.

There are refugees in all world regions. I have visited refugee camps in Bangladesh. The observations I've made of these camps include my surprise that they may become permanent. Geneva Camp in Dhaka houses refugees from the 1971 war of Bangladeshi independence.

There is in Bangladesh little sign that these refugees either assimilate into their host societies or return home. Many are aware that the Palestinian refugees in Jordan have been displaced since the 1948 and 1967 conflicts. Refugees tend to become permanent aliens in their host societies.

Haven't we been haunted by the picture of Aylan Kurdi, the 3 year old Syrian toddler washed up face down on the shore of Mediterranean Turkey? The refugee camps I've visited is surprising in how young the population skews: there are large numbers of young children and grandchildren of the original settlers wandering all about the camps.

In America, we are confronted with economic refugees, most these days from this hemisphere, but now in the face of Middle Eastern tensions, more refugees are showing up as casualties of American empire. Yet since 1950, there have been more deportations of immigrants than new certifications of citizenship. America forcibly evicts more people than it allows to settle, and various state laws in South Carolina, Arizona and elsewhere are more harshly defining economic refugees as illegal residents, with all the potential for their exploitation.

The old, old Jacob story can have much to say about this age-old epic of refugees. Like Jacob, the refugee knows that he or she has lost most of what was once most dearly held: family life, economic liberty and self-sufficiency, self-respect, self actualization of talents.

Like Jacob, the refugee may encounter the purifying hand of God, and we as potential hosts are confronted with the choice to convert to their sustenance and give refuge. Both the refugee and the potential host are to consider the great faithfulness of God.

Jacob encountered the faithful help of God in the form of his dream and converted to a new way of life. The modern refugee, if fortunate, meets the helping hand of God in charitable relief and the opportunity to convert to a new way of life in a host country. If we were to more mindfully recognize the refugee as the purified of God, then how could we neglect to reach out to them with settlement and opportunity for dignified existence?

Western claims to stand for human dignity and human rights usually look pretty hollow whenever a major refugee crisis hits. That seems to be what is happening now, as millions of refugees seek asylum in Europe — and mainly run into closed doors and cold shoulder.

Refugees are dying in rickety boats, sealed trucks and squalid refugee dumping grounds. They are not wanted where they come from and not wanted where they are going.

Article 14 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."
Articles 15 says: "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality."

Fine words, but they provoke our assertion: Not in my backyard. Not my problem. After all, the U.S. under a President Trump promises to deport the 11 million "illegals" we already have on our hands, right?

Nobody can make others, or us, do the right thing. Nobody can make us overcome our indifference and inertia and nativism.

Pope Francis has demanded that every parish in Europe's Catholic Church offer refuge. World Relief leader Stephan Bauman was saying when calling for the U.S. to offer welcome to 200,000 refugees right now.

That makes the global refugee crisis a stern moral test for us, our country and for the entire world. I believe the old, old story of Jacob is a story of reorientation of ethnic power by God that has wisdom for meeting the challenge of meeting the stranger in our midst—the increasing refugees that we may expect from globalization, political unrest and climate change.

Jacob, that old man Israel, speaks to the human condition here and now, and his dream demonstrates that the coming and going way to heaven is in God's hands and not in our own. When we meet a refugee, we meet a person purified and protected on the hard road by the one God.

We may not ignore these fugitives from injustice.