

Tell Me A Story: About Dreams
Genesis 28.10-22
July 20, 2014
Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Many weeks ago, maybe months ago, I took our “best” floor plan map of this great building, with room numbers, and enlarged it for easy reading. I marked the spaces only St. Charles uses in green, the spaces that our Community Partners use in yellow, and the spaces we share in a combination of the two. Our Community Partners are non-profits, churches, artists, and a pro bono law firm working exclusively with death row inmates.

This is a busy building during an average week, but the past 7 days were particularly busy.

We had a visiting youth choir from Missouri using the kitchen and fellowship hall each day for meals. The group sang around town in various communities and learned about our city each day, then they came here for rest and nourishment.

While some of my weeks are heavy on pastoral care, future planning, or study and reflection, this week was heavy on the church facility. I spent time with the executive director and her board of directors for Girls on the Run, a nonprofit working with 3rd-8th grade girls to promote physical and emotional wellness in girls. They rely on college-age volunteers, their organization is growing, and they want to partner with us and house their offices in our building.

I met with the director of the Greater New Orleans Youth Orchestra and the chair of the Youth Orchestra board. Another nonprofit, their goal is to provide quality, comprehensive orchestral programming to every interested young person in the city. With strong ties to Loyola University, they too are interested in housing their offices here at St. Charles. They talked excitedly about how they might partner with us as neighbors and friends.

Floating from those two back-to-back appointments, I waved goodbye, closed the courtyard door, and turned to see associate pastor Stephanie Coyne dragging a mop

bucket and choir director / volunteer building manager / woefully underpaid handyman Tom Rushing hauling a shop vac to the fellowship hall. It's summer, it's New Orleans, and one really strong thunderstorm rapidly spilled into our community gathering space. Quickly and quietly, the two of them, with help from building custodian Carolyn Wright, cleaned the mess and returned the space to normal.

Then there were the continued conversations with contractors about repairing termite damage and making basic building upgrades to the 1950s portion of our 2nd floor, and the dreaming details that go along with such a project. I ended my day Tuesday with the solar energy expert from Make it Right. Introduced by a mutual friend, the two of us sat down to talk about energy efficiency and old buildings. We talked weather stripping and caulk, antique boilers and windows, and the advantages to solar as a last phase of an organization's comprehensive energy efficiency plan.

Then, in anticipation of my writing and study week at the end of this month, I added notes from each of these meetings to my list of long-range plans. We'll add these opportunities and challenges for consideration to the list of sealing bricks from the 1920s, updating our organ, moving classrooms and storage rooms around so we can add more discipleship classes for youth and young adults, and dreaming about what else might be born in this space at the corner of Broadway St. and St. Charles Avenue. We are committed to our corner for years to come.

After worship today, we'll go downstairs to the fellowship hall and share a meal. We'll gather around tables and share highlights from the first half of 2014 as we look to the remainder of this year and even glance at the year to come. We do this because of our commitment to this place, to each other, and to the work God is doing through us here.

Sacred space matters. Being a gathering place for prayer, worship, study, mission, justice seeking, encouragement, and community is vital not just to the people gathered in this room but to those we do not even know who are outside these walls.

I was reminded of this as I first studied our text from Genesis. Jacob has left home at the urging of his mother. Having already tricked his brother Esau out of the birthright, Jacob has now also tricked his father into giving him the blessing rightly belonging to his brother. Their mother Rebekah warns Jacob that Esau is actively plotting to kill him, and she instructs him to flee.

On the run, weary from travel, Jacob comes to a place where he sleeps on a stone. And there he has the famous dream of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Maybe it's not a ladder so much as it is a ramp or some kind of stairway. Whatever the path is, there is movement on that holy way; the finite and infinite are connected. Angels are moving freely between the two realms, and God stands somewhere—either at the heaven end of the ramp or down beside Jacob at the stone—and speaks: I AM WITH YOU. I WILL KEEP YOU. I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU. I WILL RESTORE YOU.

The dreaming scene is surely what the Celts meant by “thin places” in describing sacred moments where this realm and the next seem to touch. “Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter.”¹

A couple of years ago, Eric Weiner described “thin places” in the *New York Times*, writing, “It's easier to say what a thin place is not. A thin place is not necessarily a tranquil place, or a fun one, or even a beautiful one, though it may be all of those things too. Disney World is not a thin place. Nor is Cancún. Thin places relax us, yes, but they also transform us — or, more accurately, unmask us. In thin places, we become our more essential selves.”

He concludes by asking, “Why isn't the whole world thin? Maybe it is but we're too thick to recognize it. Maybe thin places offer glimpses not of heaven but of earth as it really is, unencumbered. Unmasked.”

Weiner's travels around the globe and exploration of the divine lead him to the same question and conclusion as Jacob: “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!”

Jacob is on the run, he has twice deceived his family, but God not only outruns him, God waits for him. Jacob lands in a place he did not expect and seeks only a night's rest, but God has prepared so much more. God and the angels dance in his dreams as if to say, “So much more is available to you. The stuff of heaven can be the stuff of earth. Look! It already is, if you just pay attention. You are not alone, Jacob. You are on holy ground.”

Jacob's focus was survival. He wasn't thinking about God's presence or purpose. At this point, God was irrelevant to Jacob's journey. But this dream opened up an entirely new

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html?_r=0

understanding of what God might do to redeem and sustain and to bring all things to fullness.² In the in-between-ness of Jacob's reality (no longer where he once was and not yet where he will be), God speaks to Jacob: I AM WITH YOU. I WILL KEEP YOU. I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU. I WILL RESTORE YOU.

We're in a season of renewal here at St. Charles. After more than 115 years of being St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, it seems reasonable that something new might emerge. And after almost 90 years of being in this building, it also seems reasonable that old things need to be replaced and polished and shored up. As we have these conversations over the next year, prioritizing how we will care for this physical space and discerning together what God is inviting us to experience in our next chapter, I suggest that this place matters—these bricks and mortar, this plaster, these old wooden pews, this corner of New Orleans—all of this matters because it is a transformational thin place. This is a place where we gather in between the travels of our lives, and the finite and infinite come close for just a little while. This place matters because we are unmasked and transformed here. This place matters because we are reminded that God is with us, God will keep us, God will restore us. And that is a word that the world needs to receive.

In a mid-winter conversation about Identity, Values, and Mission at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., then-pastor Amy Butler talked about the importance of place—cultural identity, physical location, and the additional layer of sacred space.

She talked about the significance their big, old church property plays in their identity as a congregation, saying, “here we are, stewards of this amazing sacred space on a large piece of property in the middle of Washington, DC. And it is not a burden; it is not a liability; is it not an albatross around our necks keeping us from being who we are.

It's a gift.

It's a gift and a holy calling, to be stewards of this space where being the church looks different at different times over hundreds of years of history, but where place and context give us courage to nurture creative and beautiful ways in which God's grace can meet us where we are and where we can be agents of change in a world so desperate for hope that things can be different. Our PLACE helps us to know who we are and what we're called to do.”³

² Some ideas in this section inspired by Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, pp. 242-248.

³ “The Value of Place” by Amy Butler; <http://talkwiththepreacher.org/2014/01/26/the-value-of-place/>

Our planning and list making is not enough. We need to be dreaming. There need not be hand-wringing or fretting over money or staffing or how long the to-do list may be. It's time to pour oil over this stone and say to each other, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and we did not know it!"

We humans are afraid to dream big because it means we might fail big. So we set our goals small—we'll rent part of the building out and hope some new people come join us here. That's achievable. It feels safe to start small.

But I challenge you to consider: what is a God-sized dream?

And how is this building connected to what God might dream for New Orleans? For this region of the country? For you and for me?

Our planning needs to be infused with the dreams of God. Our vision needs to be infused with the stuff of heaven come to earth. Instead of simply counting heads in pews, we begin to tell stories of our lives. What have we experienced and what are we living out? And when we begin to tell our stories, we realize we are connected. And our stories, so it seems, are woven together into a larger story that we are just beginning to understand.

When we allow a new dream to guide us, we venture out into something we can't quite articulate and certainly can't fully know. Oh, that is scary stuff for most of us. That's when the words of Thomas Merton take on powerful meaning: "You do not need to know precisely what is happening or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope."

Something happens in this place, and I know you feel it when it does. Something happens here that changes us, that makes us want to come back, something that we want to carry out into the world and we want to invite others to experience.

This is a room of memories for those of you who have returned here for years now. There are the weddings and baptisms you recall. There are the sacred moments of sharing the bread and the cup at this table, there are the Christmas Eves with candles in the windows and greenery overhead. There are the full times: the spirited jazz worship

of Mardi Gras when even the balcony is dancing, the losses and funerals as stories have been told while we remember and grieve.

But for all of us, the old-timers and the newcomers, the 60 year veteran and the first time guest, this a place of welcome, a place for new life and new ideas. This is a place where we are soothed and offered peace. Where we are allowed to be still and quiet even when our minds are spinning and the demands on our times and energy seem endless. We are invited to cease all of that for just a while as we gather here. It is also a place where we are made uncomfortable as we grapple with injustice and a world not as it should be, we face our personal darkness and flaws, and we receive the challenging word to be changed—to be change—to go and sin no more—to make a difference in this world, in Jesus' name.

Surely the LORD is in this place.

I close with a blessing adapted by Archbishop Desmond Tutu from an original by Sir Francis Drake. May these words be our prayer.

*Disturb us, O Lord
when we are too well-pleased with ourselves
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little,
because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, O Lord
when with the abundance of things we possess,
we have lost our thirst for the water of life
when, having fallen in love with time,
we have ceased to dream of eternity
and in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of Heaven to grow dim.*

*Stir us, O Lord
to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas
where storms show Thy mastery,
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes
and invited the brave to follow,
our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.⁴*

⁴ "What is a Church Building?"; July 7, 2013; <http://thefunstons.com/?p=5623>