



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Last Night as I Was Sleeping

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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When you study the book of Genesis, you learn early on that it is a compilation of several different literary traditions, different voices from different times and regions of Israel that characterize God and people differently. Scholars refer to two of them as J and E, which come from the names given to God by the particular voices. In the J passages God is called Yahweh, and in these stories, God is a bit impulsive and appears physically, like the story of God stomping through the Garden looking for a cowering Adam and Eve. In the E voice, God is referred to as *Elohim*, a generic word for God. This *Elohim* is a bit more dignified and removed. Communication with humans usually happens in dreams. Dreams are present throughout the book of Genesis; Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, pharaohs and kings have dreams that move the stories along.

Today we heard the story of Jacobs dream while on the road, of a ladder with angels going up and down from heaven. And then God stands beside him and promises great things, particularly the abiding presence and care, "Know that I am with you and will keep you where ever you go..." The piece that we do not here is why Jacob is on the road. Last week, we heard that he had finagled Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew. Some years later, he took it further than that. When Isaac was blind and nearing death, Jacob pretended to be Esau and received the official paternal blessing, which apparently included being lord over all of his brothers. When the deceit was discovered, Isaac and Esau were justifiably angry. So Jacob wasn't just on the road, he was on the run. That's the back story of this dream.

Jacob appears to understand that this is one important dream and we might expect for him to be changed by it in some way. But don't hold your breath waiting for Jacob to become anything other than what he is, a scoundrel and a trickster. It's as if he could not fully trust the dream, it sounded too good to be true.

Today's poem, Last Night as I lay sleeping is by Antonio Machado, an early 20th century Spanish poet. I encountered this poem in a book called *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, with commentary by Roger Housden. It's hard to imagine a more beautiful poem.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



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Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
Oh water, are you coming to me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a fiery sun was giving
light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.

Last night as I slept,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.

Does that not just take your breath away? It is full of rich sensory images and a curious repeated phrase, "marvelous error." In Machado's original Spanish, it is *bendita illusion*, which most literally, would be translated, *blessed illusion*. I found several English version of the poem, some did use that sensible translation, one said "blessed vision." But Robert Bly gave us "marvelous error," which avoids the deprecating inference of an illusion as something unsubstantial and worthless. Bly's "marvelous error" invites us to experience the spring, the



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beehive, and the fiery sun as things so wonderful as to be too good for us to accept, not too good to be true, but better than we deserve. It must be an error, a marvelous one, but an error, none the less. How do you feel about the claim that you have God in your heart? Does it seem too grand a claim for you, you ordinary human? Could you dare to believe it and live as it were your reality and not some blessed mistake?

That middle verse, with golden bees making honey from old failures is important. Writing about this poem, Roger Housden says, "When I first heard these lines, they broke open my mind to a whole new way of seeing my life. I was in amazement. Imagine the possibility that every single turn of events, however dark or disappointing the outcome, can in some circuitous way be the raw material for something that eventually surfaces with the sweetness of honey. There is an ecology to our experience, Machado seems to suggest, in which nothing is wasted." It's not just that our mistakes and missteps might make us stronger, but that they eventually become something sweet and pure. When I think of my failures turning into golden honey, I can barely stop myself from rolling my eyes and saying, "yeah, right...marvelous error!" And yet, I have seen it happen, so why should I not expect it for all of the failures?

I came across a rather startling statistic about clergy and how fear of failure affects so many. A pastor names J.R. Briggs has written a book called *Fail*, about the toll that fear of failure in ministry takes on clergy. According to his research only 1 in 20 clergy will actually retire from the ministry. They will leave active ministry early and seek more peaceful pastures. Apparently, we clergy do not believe that our old failures will ever be anything but loud opportunities for condemnation, character indicting, giant failures - no honey to be expected because we believe that we are not allowed to fail. And failure can look like attendance dropping or financial problems for the congregation, no youth coming to church, or simply being in a place that is not growing. We take these things hard and it can lead to depression, despair. I'm not sure how represented Episcopal clergy were in his study - we work really hard to stay healthy, but it's hard to believe that it's ok to fail. Perhaps we should read this poem regularly. And then we might come to believe in honey.

Last night as I was sleeping sounds like something that Jesus would say to us. The living water and light of the world and even that it is God that we have in our hearts. Bless the poets that say it in such beautiful ways so that we might hear it with new ears and be surprised into believing even in something that seems like a marvelous error.

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