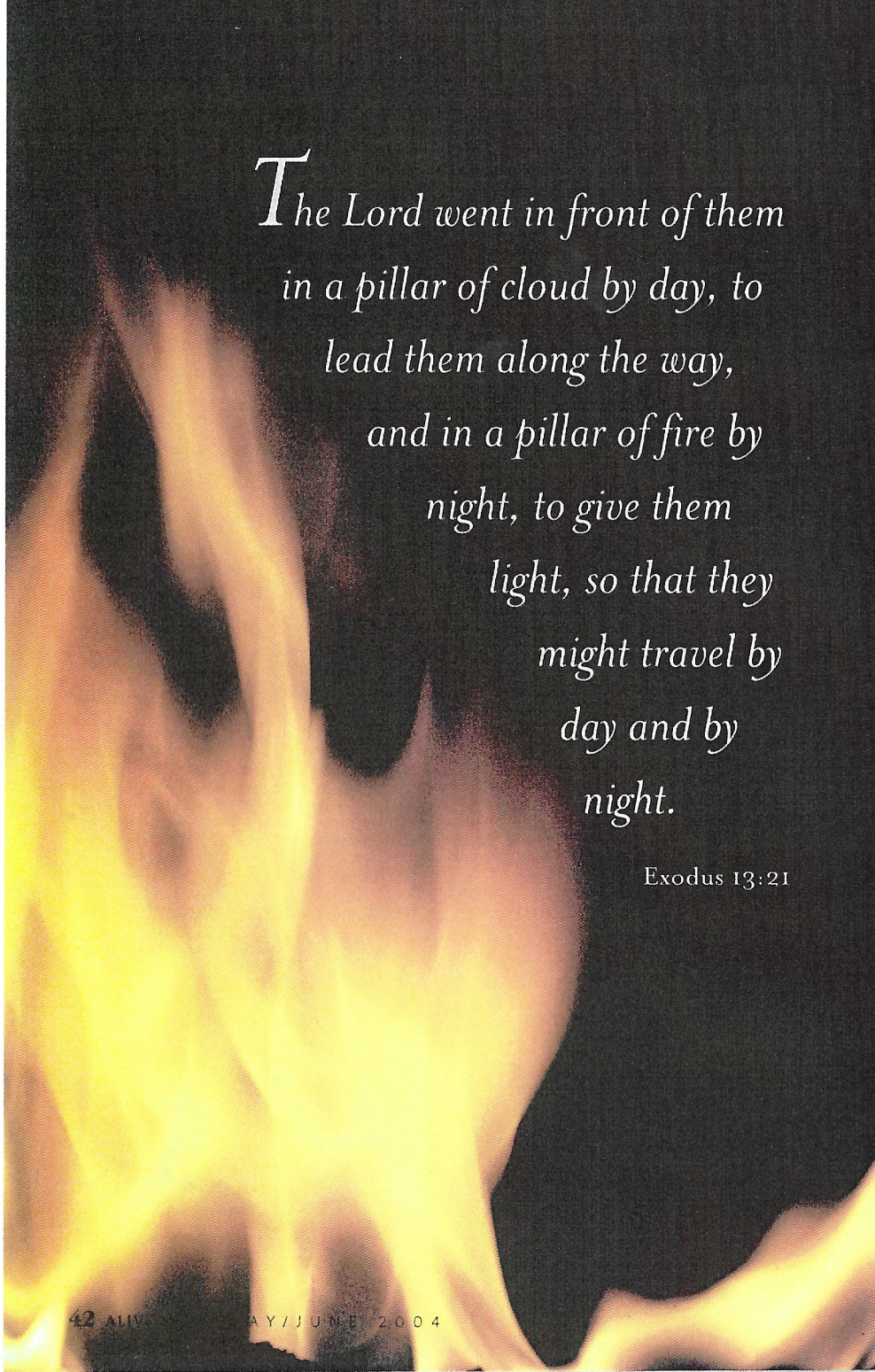




Alive Now[®]

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Visions and Voices



*The Lord went in front of them
in a pillar of cloud by day, to
lead them along the way,
and in a pillar of fire by
night, so that they
might travel by
day and by
night.*

Exodus 13:21

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Dreams as Visions

Fire by Night

BY LAURA HUFF HILEMAN

IT'S BEDTIME FOR our boys, and here's the drill: I can't turn out the lights until my four-year-old son has opened the closet door as wide as possible, clicked on the closet light, and wrapped himself in his ritual blanket. Satisfied, he lies in bed with that bare bulb shining full in his face, confident that the light will "keep away the nightmares. And if I wake up in the night, I can see where I am."

Hours later in the next room over, my own night light wakes me up. It's not bright and steady like his. It's erratic, flaming and dim, filled with images that are fascinating, troubling, funny, bewildering, and deeply meaningful. This light emanates from my dreams, my pillars of fire by

night, which illuminate my journey, draw me on to the Promised Land, and assure me that every step I take is on holy ground. Even — especially — the nightmares.

An extravagant claim? Yes, but it's nothing new, especially in Christendom. In the Bible, God often speaks through dreams (John Sanford, author of *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language*, counts at least seventy instances). The dreams of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph are foundations of the faith. Through Joel, God promises that dreams are part of the outpouring of God's spirit. In the New Testament, Joseph, the Wise Men, and John of Patmos follow dream wisdom. And the church fathers and mothers honored dreams as

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gifts from God. Only with the rise of rationalism did the Church come to disregard dreams as a source of divine revelation.

In this modern technological culture, it may seem a little odd, if not downright suspect, to reap the wisdom of dreams and claim that they are a source of divine guidance and insight. But the God of Scripture and tradition is our God too: God of continual revelation, of call and challenge and change, of love and judgment and reconciliation. When we open ourselves to the language of dreams, we can hear God's voice; we do see the movement of God in our personal and communal lives. It is nothing short of astounding.

But why, really, might we trust something as strange and arbitrary as our dreams? And how do we make sense of their apparently random jumble of images? Dream science offers some help, proving that each of us dreams every night, whether we recall it or not; affirming that dreams are real; and concluding that, like all things in the natural world, dreams have a purpose. Researchers claim that we need dreams — not just sleep — to help keep us mentally and emotionally healthy. Whatever else might be claimed about what dreams do, it's undeniable that they offer us a symbolic and metaphorical language with which to interpret our experience.

So what is this healing, purposive work of dreams? It becomes clear that the message of dreams is the same message that we hear over and over

throughout the Bible, heard (with as much terror as comfort) from the lips of the prophet, the angel, the apostle, the Christ:

Behold.

Fear not.

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
The truth will make you free.

Lo, I am with you always.

Comprehend . . . the breadth and length and
height and depth, and know the love of Christ
that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled
with all the fullness of God.

That's the big message: through our dreams we can know the lure and the longing of God toward the image of God in each of us, calling us to keep growing, to keep becoming the person God has created us to be. And the amazing thing about the dreams, the scary and irresistible thing, is that each of them is an up-to-the minute, deeply personal comment about how that process is going. Maybe a dream helps us see how we're truly feeling about a relationship. Maybe it pictures a situation we don't even realize we're in. Maybe it shows us a shadow part of ourselves that will wreak havoc if not acknowledged, or a question to ask, a challenge to embrace, an alert to spiritual danger, a reminder of what really matters. Dream wisdom reveals tough

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love and unimaginable hope. It can give us an image of the Great Wholeness that calls us into wholeness.

One part of that wholeness is remembering how to sense the significance in dream images. Understanding symbolic language may well be part of being human, however far we may feel from this native ability. And "getting" a dream isn't a matter of getting it right, as opposed to wrong. It's a more fluid, evolving kind of understanding. Dreamwork is a felt art, a prayerful, imaginative, questioning, playful interaction with the symbols over time. Write them down, paint them, work them with a dream group, play them as music, look for associations in your waking world. But hold them lightly. Pray for discernment. One good question is worth a dozen anxious interpretations. Know that with dreams, understanding feels like being understood.

In the Bible, a great cluster of dreams surrounds the birth and infancy of Jesus. They are improbable and specific: marry Mary anyway; flee to Egypt; now go home; nope, take this route instead. Each dream is given to help protect and nurture the Christ Child. Our own dreams give us the same protection and nurture: fire by night to illuminate the real Promise that we carry — that precious, indwelling God-With-Us, the unique, particular, image of Christ into which we are continually transformed. Honoring those dreams, we honor that divine possibility so that it may increase in wisdom and stature.

Laura Huff Hileman discovered dreamwork as a spiritual discipline six years ago. She has since graduated from the Haden Institute, and now facilitates dream groups in the church. A former English teacher, longtime diarist, and cradle Presbyterian, she lives in Nashville with her husband and three little boys.



In The Silence

1 Kings 19:8-12

[ELIJAH] GOT UP, AND ATE and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.