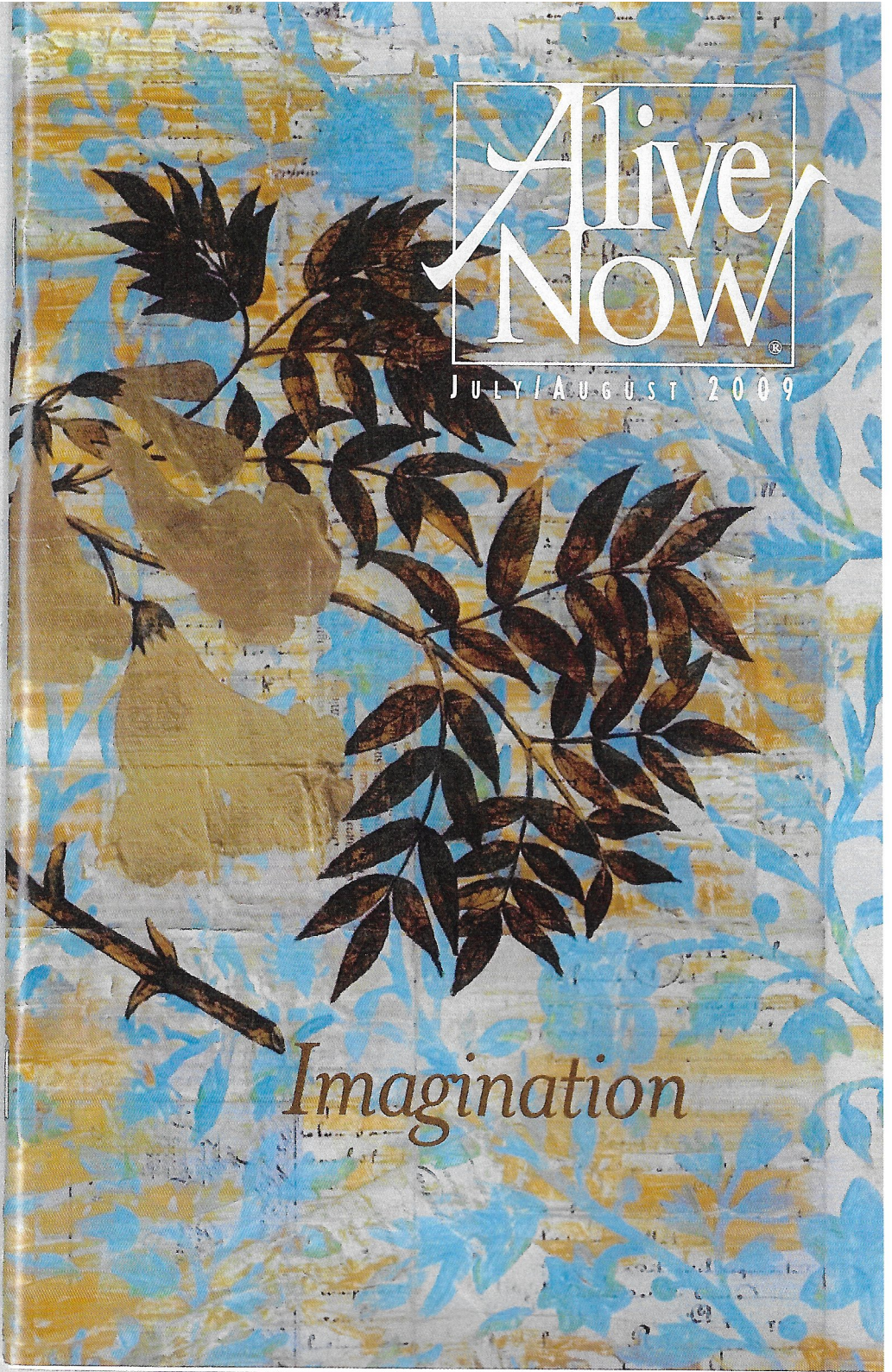




Alive Now

JULY/AUGUST 2009

Imagination

Power & Terror & Beauty

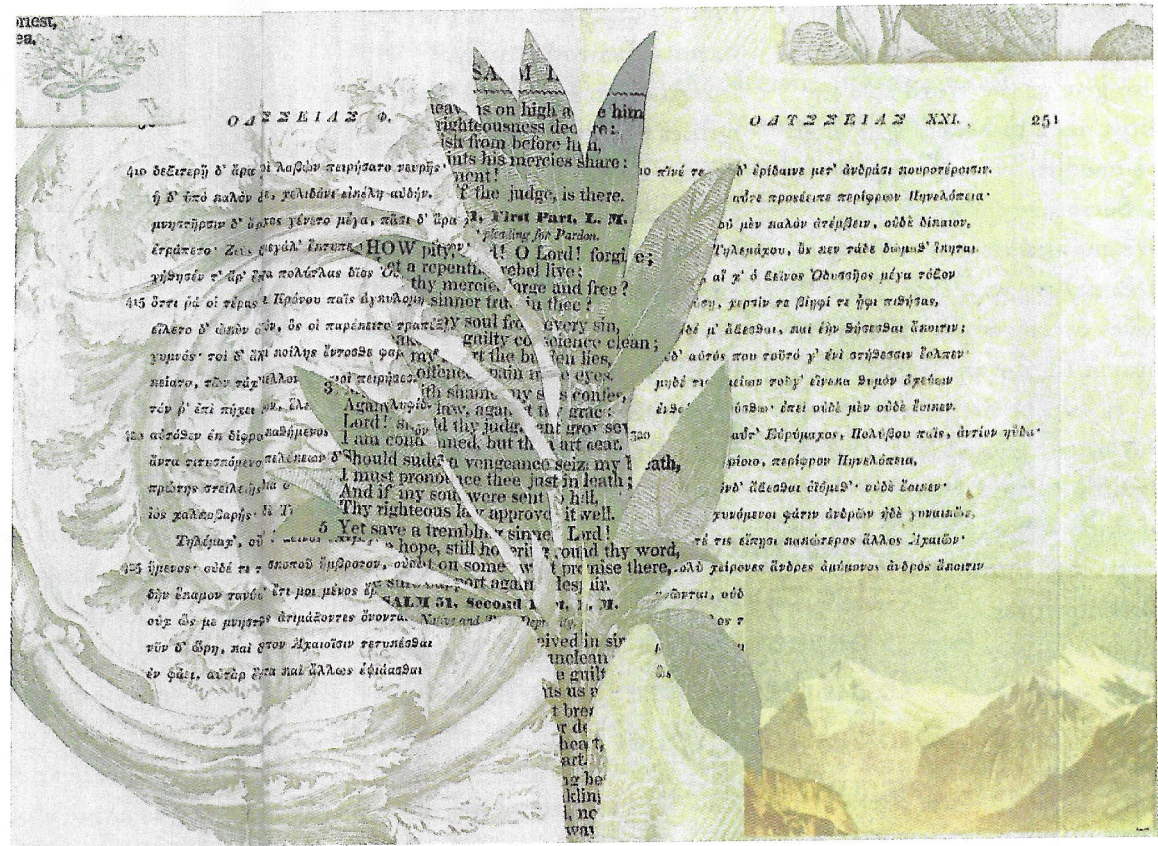
BY LAURA H. HILEMAN

IMAGINE JACOB awaking from his dream: shining angels moving on a ladder between heaven and earth; the familiar words of the Covenant; and, most amazingly, the voice of God promising unfailing presence. Jacob feels almost unbearably blessed. Powerfully disturbed. He marvels, "Surely

the LORD is in this place and I did not know it! This is the gate of heaven!" Moved by his dream, Jacob consecrates the spot and prays a vow of faithfulness. He goes on his way a changed man, permeated by a sense of mystery that leaves him feeling edgy and strange. If we let ourselves cross over

the threshold of text and into the real, breathing story, we too will feel blessed, altered, edgy, and strange. We too will feel the power of encounter with God. Reading scripture this way *changes* us. Our tradition teaches us to participate imaginatively in scripture: these days we are collectively

reclaiming *lectio divina*, Centering Prayer, and Ignatian meditation, to name a few imaginative practices. Whatever form it takes, deep listening to scripture opens us to hearing the Word as God calls us to hear it at that moment. Now Jacob's story is scripture, but it is also a dream.



BILLY RENKL

Our dreams, like the texts of our waking lives, invite us to hear the Word of God, and also give us the Word that we most need to hear, right when we need it.

Scripture shows us that dreams and visions (waking dreams) are ways that God relies on to get people's attention at important times. When we're asleep, the guardians of our unconscious relax, and the dreams — some of them —

surge into our consciousness, our memory. Dreams come from deep psyche, where the inner Christ lives and

moves, often without our conscious knowing. When dreams surface, they carry feeling and images that help us sense how God always moves with us, challenging us, changing us. Opening ourselves to the meaning of dreams requires an act of imagination.

Furthermore, imagination does not just refer to making

things up. It's not fantasy, though imagination is the impulse behind fantasy.

Imagination is the fire that ignites perception, thought, desire, compassion, speech, and action.

It is a creative force that emanates from God; it is like the Holy Spirit experienced from within and below rather than without and above.

Sometimes we call it the

Wisdom of God.

Imagination's power animates our perception of the Word, our relationship with the Word, and our doing

of the Word. So in opening to a dream, we use our imagination more than anything and find that "[God] is in this place."

Here is one such dream: Caroline, who found herself in the middle of a challenging personal transition, dreamed of being alone on a raft at night in a sea full of fierce

electrical currents. Suddenly a lightning bolt flashed down, seared her foot, and left a scorched map on her sole.

When Caroline shared this dream, our group felt the power and terror and beauty of the experience. A dream always brings news: this one showed her just how torturous her passage was at that time and how alone she really felt. Her dream showed how charged her feelings about her situation were, how they seemed to endanger her craft, and how oddly beautiful the experience was because of the risks. Mostly the dream gave her a picture of the presence of God — like a lightning bolt that not only scared her and scarred her but also marked her sole/soul with a map that assured her that even though she felt "at sea," the crossing was important to her journey. Having been marked by God, when she came to dry land, every step she took would be holy ground.

Attending to our dreams with open-minded curiosity, faith, and imagination can be a powerful spiritual practice. Pray with your dreams, and play with them. Stay open to layers of meaning. Remember that imagination is about relationship and that working with dreams involves engaging in a relationship with God more than cracking a code to get a message. When you sense the Word moving in the night, allow your imagination to give you the ears to hear and the eyes to see and the courage to be changed by the dream that God has for you.

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Scripture Readings

Exodus 3:1-6

Isaiah 2:1-4

Hosea 2:16-23

Luke 4:16-30

Ephesians 1:15-23