



Leaning Into the Heart of the Holy

2016 Lenten Devotions

Saturday

March 5, 2016

“Grace”

From *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*

By Kathleen Norris

Jacob’s theophany, his dream of angels on a stairway to heaven, strikes me as an appealing tale of unmerited grace. Here’s a man who has just deceived his father and cheated his brother out of an inheritance. But God’s response to finding Jacob vulnerable, sleeping all alone in open country, is not to strike him down for his sins but to give him a blessing.

Jacob wakes from the dream in awe, exclaiming, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” For once, his better instincts take hold, and he responds by worshiping God. He takes the stone that he’d kept close by all night, perhaps to use as a weapon if a wild animal, or his furious brother Esau, were to attack him, and sets it up as a shrine, leaving it for future travelers, so that they, too, will know that this is a holy place, the dwelling place of God.

Jacob’s exclamation is one that remains with me, as a reminder that God can choose to dwell everywhere and anywhere we go. One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or weird-looking he would respond with absolute delight.

It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt as awestruck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation. And, as Psalm 139 puts it, darkness is as nothing to God, who can look right through whatever evil we’ve done in our lives to the creature made in the divine image.

I suspect that only God and well-loved infants can see this way. But it gives me hope to think that when God gazed on the sleeping Jacob, he looked right through the tough little schemer and saw something good, if only a capacity for awe, for recognizing God and worshiping. That Jacob will worship badly, trying to bargain with God, doesn’t seem to matter. God promises to be with him always,

Peter denied Jesus, and Saul persecuted the early Christians, but God would see the apostles they would become. God does not punish Jacob as he lies sleeping because he can see in him Israel, the foundation of a people. God loves to look at us, and loves it when we will look back at him. Even when we try to run away from our troubles, as Jacob did, God will find us, and bless us, even when we feel most alone, unsure if we'll survive the night, God will find a way to let us know that he is with us *in this place*, wherever we are, however far we think we've run. And maybe that's one reason we worship—to respond to grace. We praise God not to celebrate our own faith, but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let ourselves look at God, and let God look back at us. And to laugh, and sing, and be delighted because God has called us his own.

Kathleen Norris. "Grace," *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books: New York, 1998.

Prayer:

Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

A video of this hymn can be found at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3w9nvXuVnk>

You may need to cut and paste the links into your web browser.

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "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; and 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. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."