

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD

The Practice of Waking Up to God: Vision

Promptings offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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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.'

***Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,
'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!'***

Genesis 28:16

One of the highlights for me of the United Church of Christ General Synod back in June was the opportunity to hear Barbara Brown Taylor speak. It is the second time I have had the opportunity to hear her speak. And like the first time, the experience was wonderful. And this time I was thrilled to share the experience with some other Cross Creekers. In my opinion, Barbara Brown Taylor is one of the best Christian writers, preachers and thinkers out there today. She is an excellent storyteller and her southern accent will draw you in and charm you.

Over the years, Taylor's writings have mainly been consumed by clergy-types. Her collections of sermons and reflections on the preaching life have been, and still are, essential tools in the preachers' toolbox. But it was her riveting book *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* that marked the beginning of her crossover appeal to an audience wider than clergy. And now, with the release of her newest book, *An Altar in the World: a Geography of Faith*, she is fully engaged with that wider audience. And today, I am excited to begin a new series of sermons that will use her new book as our guide.

As I shared in *This Week at the Creek* this past week, the focus of this series can be summarized in one word: *practices*. Practices...as in the things we do that enable us to experience and encounter God. You may be surprised to discover that the practices we will be talking about are NOT a burden to bear...they are NOT some religious oddities that may seem appropriate to a monastery but not the world in which you live...they are NOT some bizarre behaviors that would cause you to declare, either verbally or to yourself: "that ain't gonna happen!" Instead, what we will be talking about are the everyday, ordinary sort of things that enliven and empower life in the Spirit!

In the world of academe, the *practices* of faith have been the focus of many studies and grant-funded research projects over the past decade or so. Books like *Practicing Our Faith: a Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and *A Christianity for the Rest of Us* by Diana Butler Bass are excellent examples of this focus. And from these many and varied studies the word is out: practices, both corporate and personal, enrich the life of faith and are the engines of vitality for communities of faith both large and small! Taylor's work is just one more important contribution to this focus on spiritual practices. And while Taylor's focus is on personal practices, or those practices that are not necessarily "churchy," she declares that the

"purposeful return to these practices has the power to save religions that have just about run out of breath. If you have run out of breath yourself – or out of faith – then this book is for you...I have no idea what you will see when you look at your life – but if you are tired of arguing about religion, tired of reading about spirituality, tired of talk-talk-talking about things that matter without doing a single thing that matters yourself, then the pages that follow are dedicated to you...My hope is that reading them will help you recognize some of the altars in this world – ordinary looking places where human beings have met and may continue to meet up with the divine More that they sometimes call God."

So, with all of that said, I hope that you will make weekend worship a regular *practice* in the weeks ahead. And if at all possible you will come to worship having read a chapter of Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. If you do, you will be doing the *practice* of study! And in saying that, I am still haunted by the words of Rabbi Irwin Kula, who said: "When I pray, I talk to God. When I study, God talks to me." Anyway, I think these two practices – worship and study -- are a basic, winning recipe...a beginning point...for some spiritual growth and a renewed encounter with God!

Oh, and by the way, I have ordered a number of hardback copies of Taylor's book and they are available in the church hallway for purchase for the discounted price of \$20 each. And if you would like to read the book but can't afford it, please let me know and we will work something out!

As I mentioned earlier Barbara Brown Taylor is a great storyteller. Listen to how she tells the story of Jacob and his naming of Bethel or "house of God:"

At least that is what Jacob called the place where he encountered God – not on a gorgeous island but in a rocky wilderness – where he saw something that changed his life forever. The first time I read Jacob's story in the Bible, I knew it was true whether it ever happened or not. There he was, still a young man, running away from home because his whole screwy family had finally imploded. His father was dying. He and his twin brother, Esau, had both wanted their father's blessing. Jacob's mother had colluded with him to get it, and though his scheme worked, it enraged his brother to the point that Jacob fled for his life. He and his brother were not identical twins. Esau could have squashed him like a bug. So Jacob left with little more than the clothes on his back and when he had walked as far as he could, he looked around for a stone he could use for a pillow.

When he had found one the right size, Jacob lay down to sleep, turning his cheek against the stone that was still warm from the sun. Maybe the dream was in the stone, or maybe it fell out of the sky. Wherever the dream came from, it was vivid: a ladder set up on the earth, with the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending it like bright-winged ants. Then, all of a sudden, God was there beside Jacob, without a single trumpet for warning, promising him safety, children, land. "Remember, I am with you," God said to him. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob woke while God's breath was still stirring the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him: same wilderness, same rocks, same sand. If someone had held a mirror in front of his face, Jacob would not have seen anything different there either,

except for the circles of surprise in his eyes. “Surely the Lord is in this place,” he said out loud, “—and I did not know it!” Shaken by what he had seen, he could not seem to stop talking. “How awesome is this place!” he went on. “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

It was one of those dreams he could not have made up. It was one of those dreams that is so much more real than what ordinarily passes for real that trying to figure out “What really happened” involves a complete re-definition of terms. What is really real? How do you know? Can you prove it? Even if Jacob could never find the exact place where the feet of that heavenly ladder came to earth – even if he could never find a single angel footprint in the sand – his life was changed for good. Having woken up to God, he would never be able to go to sleep again. At least not to the divine presence that had promised to be with him whether he could see it or not. What really happened? God knows. All Jacob knew was that he had to mark the spot.

Looking around for something that would do the trick, he spotted the obvious choice: his stone pillow, lying right where he had left it, although the sand around it was churned up from this unusual night’s sleep. First he dug a sturdy footing for the stone. Then he stood it up, ladder-like, and set it into place. Then he poured oil on it and gave it a name: Bethel, House of God. Looking back at it as he walked away, he saw a stone finger rooted in the earth, pointing straight up through the sky.

Have you ever woken up to God? Like Jacob, have you ever caught a vision of the Holy, that mysterious Other? Can you name that place? That time? My guess is that you have, or you wouldn’t be hanging around here!

This practice of waking up to God is the doorway into the life of faith. To have a vision of God, to sense God’s presence, to know first-hand that God is with you, to discover that “surely the Lord is in this place and I didn’t know it” (whatever or wherever that place is) – well, there is nothing else like it in the world. And these visions will lead you into a deepening experience of God. They will guide you into change and transformation that you could never have imagined.

And for me, my immersion in the life of the Church has been at the center of my visions. I am going to name a few visions that have shaped my life and ministry over the past number of years. These are my visions, but I hope that as I share them they may cause you to recall some of your own.

I am thinking of the liberating vision I received in a class at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of all places, entitled “The Church and Sexuality,” taught by Dr. Paul Simmons. In that class, being gay and Christian came together for me for the first time, even though it would take a few more years to sort that vision all out.

I am thinking of the vision I had while in worship at the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. I had recently been fired from my Southern Baptist pastorate here in the Dayton area for refusing to recant that I understood myself to be a gay man. I was a wounded and hurting and lost man at the time. A few weeks after the firing, and after a news story circulated among many Southern Baptist state newspapers entitled “Gay Pastor Outed in Dayton,” I received a phone call from the Rev. Dr. Mahan Siler, pastor of the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church. He had read the story in the *Biblical Recorder*, the news journal of North Carolina Southern Baptists. Pullen Church had been recently kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention in a very public and mean way for their welcome and acceptance of gay and lesbian people. So as a straight man, and a fellow minister of the Gospel of Jesus, and out of the blue, Mahan simply called to encourage me...called to tell me how sorry he was that I had been fired...called to invite me to come to Raleigh, to get out of Dayton for a little while, and as he said, “to come on down to Raleigh and let us love on you a little.”

I had heard about this church and I had imagined it to be a little dying church, located in the midst of a “gay” neighborhood in Raleigh, and that somehow, there were enough gay people in that little church to make it a place of welcome and protest. I had just figured that the Southern Baptist

Convention used that little church to make a very public point and to warn other churches NOT to go and do likewise.

When I arrived in Raleigh, I was blown away by the size and vitality of that church. The church had 800 members and it seemed to me that about 10-20% of its people were gay and lesbian. It was located next to North Carolina State University.

I attended three Sunday services while I was there the first time. The first Sunday I was there the church welcomed a man as a new member *in absentia*. The man was not able to be physically present because he was very sick and in the last stages of dying as a result of AIDS.

The second Sunday the church dedicated 6 children. Five of the couples were straight and the other couple was two gay men who happened to be dedicating their second child, both of which they had adopted from mothers with crack cocaine addictions. Those two gay men stood before the congregation as loving, doting parents and it all seemed so normal – in a *Baptist* church this was *normal!* It was mindboggling to me and disorienting.

The third Sunday I was there was a communion Sunday and I watched as that church gathered around table, gay and straight together, no big deal, just a local congregation seeking to follow in the way of Jesus and be the Body of Christ in the world. But it was at that communion table that the vision came to me. Well before Cross Creek was ever conceived, I saw myself pastoring a church like that. It was a Jacob's-Ladder-sort-of-vision for sure. It was a vision of welcome, and of love, and of Jesus' wide embrace that included me as if it were *normal*...and I would never be the same again. What I thought was impossible -- a church where gay and straight people could come together in service and love – where a gay man could serve openly as a pastor -- was changed forever and I saw a vision of what was possible...what was indeed already real.

I am also thinking of Cross Creek's embrace of a more progressive theology at the center of our Christian witness. After Cross Creek was started, it didn't take long to see that all the furor and fighting over gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender inclusion in the Church had at its root a theological problem. The exclusion of people around sexual orientation and sexual identity was really just a symptom of some bad, misguided, worn out and unhelpful theology. So for me, as vision came to me of theological renewal and credibility, grounded in the Jesus way, a way marked first and foremost by love, but also concerned about God's dream of justice for all the world. And if I heard it once, I heard it a hundred times, especially after folks read Marcus Borg's book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, people would say: "Now Mike, if I can think like that, I can be a Christian." And here we are.

And I have to tell you, that even as we have taken steps to intentionally move into the future and wrestle with the questions of our mortgage debt and our building size and needs, I still feel those visions pulsating in me...visions that are Bethels to me...visions that have caused me to wake up and stay awake to God in new and exciting and life-giving ways....visions that still cause me to get out of bed each morning with new energy and new hope.

So when I look at the drawings of the "master plan" we just affirmed as a congregation back in June, I can't help but think that we have only scratched the surface as to what our church can *be* and *become* and *do* as we seek to be the Body of Christ together. In those drawings I still see visions of a Cross Creek Community Church teeming with life and love and extravagant welcome and keen theological insight and courageous witness and bold action – and all of it springing forth from THIS community of faith that desires and knows how to practice being awake to God.

But let me be clear, church is not the only place to see and experience visions of God. I certainly hope that church can be helpful and encouraging as you seek God...that church can keep you open and awake to the presence of God in the world...that church can be a guide and a friend and not a hindrance or a block to an experience of God. But I share Barbara Brown Taylor's concern, that

"somewhere along the line we bought – or were sold – the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion. We believed that God's home was the church, that God's people

knew who they were, and that the world was a barren place full of lost souls in need of all the help they could get. Plenty of us seized on those ideas because they offered us meaning. Believing them gave us purpose and worth. They gave us something noble to do in the midst of lives that might otherwise be invisible. Plus, there really are large swaths of the world filled with people in deep need of saving.

The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.”

I also share her concern about “Houses for God” becoming impediments to the Divine and not an entry way. She says,

As important as it is to mark the places where we meet God, I worry about what happens when we build a house for God...[like] the house of worship on the corner, where people of faith meet to say their prayers, because saying them together reminds them of who they are better than saying them alone. This is good, and all good things cast shadows. Do we build God a house so that we can choose when to go see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at ours? Plus, what happens to the rest of the world when we build four walls – even four gorgeous walls—cap them with a steepled roof, and designate that the House of God? What happens to the riverbanks, the mountaintops, the deserts, and the trees? What happens to the people who never show up in our houses of God?

These are important questions that Taylor asks and it would behoove each of us on a regular basis to ponder and offer some answers (perhaps “confessions” might be a better word) to those questions. Certainly our Christian faith, with its sacred scriptures, and the life and way of Jesus, offer us many ideas and insights to these questions. Or, as Taylor notes:

Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture. What is true is what happens, even if what happens is not always right. People can learn as much about the ways of God from business deals gone bad or sparrows falling to the ground as they can from reciting the books of the Bible in order. They can learn as much from a love affair or a wildflower as they can from knowing the Ten Commandments by heart.

This is wonderful news. I do not have to choose between the Sermon on the Mount and the magnolia trees. God can come to me by a still pool on the big island of Hawaii as well as at the altar of the Washington National Cathedral. The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. Sea monsters and ostriches live in it, along with people who pray in languages I do not speak, whose names I will never know.

I am not in charge of this House, and never will be. I have no say about who is in and who is out. I do not get to make the rules. Like Job, I was nowhere when God laid the foundations of the earth. I cannot bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion. I do not even know when the mountain goats give birth, much less the ordinances of the heavens. I am a guest here, charged with serving other guests – even those who present themselves as my enemies. I am allowed to resist them, but as long as I trust in one God who made us all, I cannot act as if they are no kin to me. There is only one House. Human beings will either learn to live in it together or we will not survive to hear its sigh of relief when our numbered days are gone.

I know I have read too much from Taylor's book today, so forgive me. But I hope it was enough to get you thinking...enough to get you interested and excited about waking up to God...enough to tease you into wanting to know a little bit more about the practices that put us in touch with God...enough to see how fun it will be to have Barbara Brown Taylor as a guide.

Oh, I can't help it. Here is one more word from Barbara Brown Taylor as I close:

Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish – separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars. Jacob's nowhere, about which he knew nothing, turned out to be the House of God. Even though his family had imploded, even though he had made his brother angry enough to kill him, even though he was a scoundrel from the word go – God decided to visit Jacob right where he was, though Jacob had not been right about anything so far and never would be. God gave Jacob vision, so Jacob could see the angels going up and down from earth to heaven, going about their business in the one and only world there is.

The vision showed Jacob something he did not know. He slept in the House of God. He woke at the gate of heaven. None of this was his doing. The only thing he did right was to see where he was and say so. Then he turned his pillow into an altar before he set off, praising the God who had come to him where he was.