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“Advent in Plain Sight: Gates”

Part I of the Sermon Series, “Advent in Plain Sight.”

Genesis 28:10-19a and Matthew 24:29-35

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Introduction

Richard Rohr claims that there are three experiences in this life that really change a person: a great love, a mystical vision, and great suffering.

In the Old Testament book of Genesis, Jacob experiences all three. Today, with our reading, we get a glimpse into his mystical vision. Jacob has just stolen his older twin brother Esau’s birthright. He’s received the blessing of their father and set out on a journey – a journey to both of flee his rightfully furious brother and to return to the land of his mother to find a wife.

Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³And 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; ¹⁴and 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. ¹⁵Know 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.’ ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ ¹⁷And 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.’

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel.

Matthew 24

²⁹ ‘Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

³⁰Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’

Sermon

What if God can drop a ladder absolutely anywhere?ⁱ

Yesterday, Chris, Eleanor, our dog Scout, and I drove back from our Thanksgiving trip to see my family in South Carolina. It was getting close to supper time as we were pulling off the interstate, and Chris and I were talking about what kind of leftovers we could scrounge up for dinner. As we were lost in our mundane meal planning, Eleanor spoke up rather matter-of-factly. “God is following us,” she said.

“God is always following me,” she explained, “because God made me.”

“Absolutely, sweet girl,” we said. “God made you, and God is always with you.”

What is it about growing up that makes us forget that truth? What is it about the hustle and bustle of life that crowds out our thinking and our awareness of the holy?



What if God can drop a ladder absolutely anywhere?

In Genesis, we encounter Jacob on the way. He is on the run because of a blessing. He has had to flee the only home he has ever known because he has taken what was rightfully his brother Esau's. He was never his father's favorite and now he has had to leave forever the mother who favored him. When Jacob makes camp for the night, he is utterly alone in the world. He has lost family, community, and all the grounding symbols of his identity. He got what he wanted from his father, and it immediately cost him everything.

Jacob is in the wilderness. He finds himself alone, divorced from all steady sources of security. He falls asleep with nothing to his name but an empty blessing and a stone for a pillow.

In the vulnerability of sleep, the dream finds him. It is vivid: a ladder set up on earth, with the top of it reaching up to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending—up and down, up and down—from heaven to earth and back again. Then in an instance, God is there beside Jacob, without a single trumpet sound for warning, promising Jacob all he could ever ask for—safety, children, land. “Remember, I am with you,” God says. “I will not leave you.”

Jacob woke while God's breath was still stirring the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him.ⁱⁱ There was the same wilderness, the same rocks, the same land. “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” Jacob exclaims.

Along the British Isles, there are certain sites that the locals call “thin places.” These are places where it is believed the distance between heaven and earth shrinks, and the veil between the two worlds is so “thin” you can actually sense or perceive something of heaven itself. These places were often found where water met the land, by fjords and rivers, by wells where water bubbled up from deep below, or by doorways which were the meeting places from the outside to the inside. These thin places spoke of meeting and of transitions from one state to another.

When Christianity spread into the British Isles, Celtic Christians preserved this understanding and built monasteries and cemeteries along many of these sites. People who visit these sites today sometimes say they know—deep down inside—they are on holy ground.

What if God can drop a ladder between heaven and earth absolutely anywhere?

It took a while for the disciples to realize who Jesus really was. It was Peter who first voiced the revelation. But even for him, it took time. According to the Gospels, these men traveled with Jesus from village to village. They heard him preach and teach, watched him heal and sow compassion. Even with these signs, it wasn't always fully clear to them.



When Jesus spoke of the Son of Man and of signs and symbols, it must have seemed strange to his friends. Was he speaking of some future revolution? Or the Messiah? Could he be pointing toward some immanent apocalypse?

Jesus' words in Matthew may sound strange to us, or even a little out of place, but he is sharing with his disciples a promise—a promise that no matter what, God will be with them, God has not forgotten them.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus himself is our thin place. He's the one who opens the barrier and shows us the God we long for. There, in Jerusalem, right there among the twelve, God drops a ladder down. The divine walks and talks among them.

Some 800 years ago, Francis of Assisi was quite concerned about what people had come to believe.ⁱⁱⁱ They believed in a sort of “sky god” who was far away from them and sat in judgment of them. There wasn't an easy way to be in touch with that god. To the average person, God seemed distant and uninvolved in their daily coming and going.

Francis was trying to explain to the people that God was not some distant being in the sky—that God was here, with God's creation, with God's people. To help make that image more real, tradition tells us that Francis created the first creche, the first manger scene. He collected figures of sheep and cows and donkeys. He found or created little statues of baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. He added shepherds, maybe kings, and placed the figures all among hay and alongside or inside of a simple stable.

Francis did all of that to teach people that God is here—that God is not some sky god up in the heavens distant and judging us, but that God is living with us, abiding with us.

Earlier this week, I was talking with my physician about her Thanksgiving plans. My doctor shared that she was making two Thanksgiving meals on Thursday. Impressed, I asked whether she was really hosting that many people in her home to have to do twice the shopping and baking and basting. My doctor shared that she was making the second meal for her dear friend and neighbor who'd just returned from a hospital stay. In her early forties, this friend had a blood clot that nearly took her life a few weeks ago. She spent days and days in the hospital, at various points was not expected to live. She returned home last weekend, and even now she is on dialysis for what may be her whole future. “It's a miracle my friend survived,” my doctor explained. “And do you know the most amazing part?” she went on. “The most amazing part is that when her husband told her how frightened we all were—how much pain she appeared to be in—my friend told me that all she remembers was the feeling of being held. She felt God's arms around her. I know you believe this, Elizabeth, God was with her that whole time. *That* was the miracle.”



Our experience of the holy breaking in isn't always so dramatic as Jacob's mystical vision or Jesus' apocalyptic words to his disciples. Sometimes, it is as simple as the real sense of God's presence. Sometimes, it's in the moment of placing a manger scene and remembering God came down. Sometimes, it's as simple as that friend or therapist telling us that she will hold hope for us when we can't seem to find it for ourselves. Sometimes, it is as simple as a word of blessing, a promise of love, the relief of forgiveness, the words of a child.

Falling asleep on a stone, Jacob encounters God in the wilderness, at an unexpected "gate of heaven." He discovers that God is in this place, and he didn't even know it.

God can absolutely drop a ladder anywhere.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of the new year for Christians. What we do on this day is hope. We hope for something that is promised by God and anticipated, but not yet fully realized. During the first Advent, as Mary became aware of the life growing inside her, hope grew. God grew, unseen, yet present.

Today, we wait at the gate with hope once more. We stand in the thin place of Advent—in the midst of the uncertainty of life, in the anticipation of what awaits our world. We hope for what we do not have, trusting that God's promises will come. We must pay attention to the signs—pay attention to the signs of hope around us.

May we remain open and stand in hope at this liminal space—at the threshold —at the gate.

Friends, I invite you to join me in our next hymn—remain seated, as we remember the promise—the hope—that while we are waiting, Jesus comes.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor asks this question in her introduction to *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, (New York: Harper One, 2009), 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ I first became aware of this story from a video interview of Alexander John Shaia on "God's Grace Comes to Us" found at www.theworkofthepeople.com.

