

“Sacred Rest”

Genesis 28:10-19

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Writer poet Wendell Berry said in his novel Jayber Crow that, “Prayer is like lying awake at night, afraid, with your head under the cover, hearing only the beating of your own heart. It is like a bird that has blundered down the flue and is caught indoors and flutters at the windowpanes. It is like standing a long time on a cold day, knocking at a shut door.”

Whenever I’m in small groups with folks and we start to talk about prayer, it often turns into a time of confession. I don’t pray enough. I don’t take time to pray every day. I’m not always sure when to pray or how to pray or what prayer does. Asking people about prayer and their prayer practices can quickly turn into a shame spiral.

There is one exception to this pattern. When I ask people what kind of situation they are most likely to pray in, the answer is almost always the same: when I am afraid. When I am desperate. When I have nowhere else to turn. That is when we pray. That is when we find the words, even if the words are “Please God, help me.” That is when we turn toward God.

I haven’t done the math but I’m pretty sure “Please God, help me” is not just the most popular modern prayer - it’s the number one prayer in the Bible. This ranking might be rivaled by “Thank you, God!” But the thank you prayers always come after the “help me” prayers have been answered.

The story we read from Genesis about Jacob is a “help me” prayer without words. Jacob is on the run from his brother who is furious that Jacob conspired against him to steal his birthright. He is headed to his uncle’s home, who is a stranger to him, hoping he will be safe

there. Jacob is a refugee, traveling along with an uncertain destination. And he is exhausted.

Exhausted from scheming. Exhausted from fighting. Exhausted from travel.

He collapses for the night, too weary to go any farther, improvising for a pillow with the only object nearby: a rock. I imagine that Jacob was too tired to say his prayers before he slipped into sleep. I imagine that God has watched over Jacob on his journey so no words are necessary. I imagine that God knows that Jacob's actions: the plotting, the betrayal, the fleeing, are all a cry for help.

So God responds to Jacob's prayers by appearing in his dream, with this incredible vision of angels moving up and down a ladder between heaven and earth, connecting Jacob to God. In the dream, God assures Jacob that he will never be alone, making this promise:

"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."

When Jacob wakes up he is full of awe and hope for his future. He marks this place as sacred by pouring oil over the rock he slept on, designating it as a place he will return to, a place that will remind him of God's promise and protection.

This story is one that is deeply personal, a private revelation between God and an individual, but it contains wisdom to inform our own faith. Jacob's magnificent dream reminds us first of what can happen when we pause for rest and second what can happen when we return to the places where we have experienced something sacred.

When Jacob is exhausted, he stops. He rests for the night. He doesn't try to push through or travel through the night. He gives in to the need for rest and renewal before being able to continue his journey. Jacob is someone who, when faced with conflict, first responded with a fight, then responded with a flight, and finally decided to freeze.

What an important reminder that it is okay, and even advisable, to rest when we are tired, that we don't always have to push through the pain or make ourselves keep going. God needed Jacob to stop long enough for him to hear God's blessing. God needed an opening of time and space in order to be heard.

There is something sacred happens when we allow ourselves to rest. Teresa Heresy knows this, and so in 2016 she started what is known today as The Nap Ministry. Teresa writes about the liberating power of rest, and she creates spaces and opportunities for people to rest. She invites people to communal nap experiences where there is a room with pillows, cots, blankets, and a culture of quiet and sleep. Obviously this was before 2020. But The Nap Ministry pushes back against the little voice inside us that says we need to keep going, it's never enough, we need to work harder.

Teresa says, "Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy. This is our main tenet since we started researching our REST IS RESISTANCE framework back in 2013. We cling to this truth like a lifeboat in a raging sea. We cling to the power of collective care and collective rest opening the DREAMSPACE that will allow us to invent and imagine a New World rooted in rest."

In stopping, giving in to rest, Jacob creates enough space for God to appear and to be able to hear what God is trying to tell him. We talk about rest as renewal, and I believe that part of that renewal is claiming time to remember who we are, where we come from, and who we are called to be. In rest comes self and spiritual revelations. In rest we can reclaim our purpose. In rest we reconnect with the wisdom inside ourselves, with our Creator who is beside us.

The second thing Jacob teaches us is the important of marking sacred places where we have encountered God, and returning to them again and again. When Jacob wakes up from his

dream he builds an altar, a place that is set aside as sacred, a place that will be remembered as a place where God can be encountered. The visual of an altar sends a signal to other people who might pass by it that it is sacred ground, to treat it with reverence. I imagine this altar as an invitation for others to come, to rest, to have their own dreams that remind them of their purpose and prepare them for the next leg of their journey.

It is important for us to mark our own sacred spaces, to return to them again and again, to invite others to them so that we can share those restful, dream-like encounters with the sacred. When I miss worshiping in Edgewood's sanctuary together, it isn't a certain stained glass window or the shape of the pews or the rise of the ceiling to the heavens that I miss. It's those things, but only because we have marked them as sacred, we have set them aside as a space where we come together to rest, to remember our purpose, to listen for God in our midst, to invite others in to join us.

There is no one necessary item or design needed to mark a place as sacred. But it's about what happens in those spaces. The history that is passed down from one generation to the next. The stories that are told. The prayers that are spoken and sung and offered in collective silence. The promises that are made to go out renewed and awakened to how God is calling to us.

We are living in a moment when we are surrounded by the urgency of the moment. When there is so much work to do, whether it is justice work or vocational work or the work of parenting, more work than we can ever accomplish in a day or a week or a lifetime. We are living in a moment when we are told to hurry up, find the answers, create, change, and go, go, go. We are also living in a moment when many of us have been separated from the places that are most sacred to us - the places where we go to dream, to experience god, to rest and renew our spirits.

Our call is to do as Jacob did: stop where we are. Know that the journey will continue when we wake, but first we must rest. Take a nap. Allow yourself to dream. Listen for the voice of God and the promises that have been made for your future. Rest. Don't let the urgency of the moment overtake you. And then, wherever you find that rest, wherever you reconnect with God or your purpose, make that place as sacred.

Open yourself to new sacred spaces in places that might surprise you. In your home, in your yard, in a nearby park, in the backyard of a beloved friend. In places you only passed through before on your way to somewhere else, but you find yourself spending a lot more time in. Linger there. Listen for God's presence which never leaves us. Build an altar so that you remember it is sacred. Return again and again and again.

Create space to rest. Allow yourself to rest. Open yourself to dreams. Look for the sacred places and mark them well. Return. Repeat. This is our call. This is our work that doesn't feel like work at all. May God find us when we most need Her. May God hear our cries for help whether they are spoken aloud in a prayers or whispered in our hearts. And may we rest, knowing that rest is sacred, that through rest we might travel with the angels between heaven and earth and back again. Amen.