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Genesis 28:10-22

Finding Everyday Altars

Goal: To help congregation begin to envision a different way of life that does not necessary involve adding more to their “to do” list, but instead involves a new level of awareness, openness and mindfulness to the presence of God through daily life.

What would need to happen or where would you would need to go to fully and completely encounter God? I presume that most of us would think for a skinny minute and then select an exotic location that most likely would involve travel, money, or at least a structure that would create time away from our ‘normal’ life. When we think of encountering God we normally think outside the normal routines and practices of our lives. The thought is that we need to go away from normal, away from the routine, away from our daily practices, away from the demands of life and then and only then will we be able to fully encounter God. The reality is that we might be able to make such a trip, but what, once a year? Maybe every other year? So in the meantime we accept some form of defeat in how often we will be able to fully, wholeheartedly encounter and embrace the living God.

Now, when asked the question about encountering God most of us would probably not have immediately thought of washing dishes, going to work, buying groceries, doing laundry, pulling weeds, mowing the yard, making a pot of coffee, brushing our teeth, changing diapers, cleaning toilets, raking leaves, picking up our child from school, going for a bike ride, having lunch with a friend, or the list could go on and on. It has been said that “the reason so many of us cannot see the red X that marks the spot (of where God is) is because we are standing on it (the X)”ⁱ

Today it is not my goal to have you leave with a longer to-do list. Instead, it is my hope that we can begin to envision a different way of life created by having a new level of awareness, openness, and mindfulness to the presence of God through our daily *ordinary* lives.

You might recall that the Bible, the Word of God, begins in Genesis with the amazing story of creation. Within this narrative it is declared almost flippantly that “God created the heavens and the earth... and it was good!” However, over time humanity has worked hard and succeeded at making a solid division between the spiritual and the material, between the sacred and the secular. Yet in the story of incarnation, of God coming near to us, of Immanuel, God chooses birth in a stable to fully reveal the new revelation. Can you imagine being one of the shepherds and being told to come and see the new king and **this** is how you will know that you have found him.... Can you see them just leaning forward eager to hear what the defining factor will be. It wasn't that he would be seated in a throne of gold with individuals fanning him, but instead he will be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, in the food plate of animals. I don't think that God could have made it any clearer that there is something important, life-giving, and imperative in keeping the spiritual and material together.

This connection of the spiritual and the material, as well as the calling to find everyday altars, is clearly depicted in the story of Jacob found in Genesis chapter twenty-eight. Here we find Jacob in the middle of nowhere. Jacob had recently deceived his father and brother with the help of his mother. He had received the blessing that was meant for his brother, Esau. Esau discovers the deception and understandably quite livid and goes a step further to state his intention to kill Jacob after as the days of mourning his father's death. Their mother overhears Esau's promise, tells Jacob, and Jacob leaves. And so here in chapter twenty-eight we find Jacob in the middle of nowhere, between locations, deciding to stop for the night and sleep. Looking around he decides to use one of the stones he finds as his pillow.

As Jacob made himself comfortable in this **nameless place** with an **ordinary rock** as he pillow, he was **not** expecting a religious experience or encounter with God. While he slept he

had a dream, however, it was more like a visit from the Divine God. In this visit Jacob sees and describes a ladder or ramp with traffic happening from earth to heaven. And then the Lord spoke to Jacob, giving him a blessing and ending the blessing by reminding Jacob, “I am with you. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Much more could be said about God’s message and what it means for the people of God; however, for today I simply highlight that in the middle of nowhere, during the ordinary experiences of Jacob’s life, Jacob encountered God.

In verse sixteen we read how **Jacob woke up to God**.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD was in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven. (28:16-17)

We need to keep in mind that Jacob woke up to the same stone, the same wilderness, the same sand. In fact he was sleeping on the ground, with a stone as a pillow, which means that his body was probably sore and stiff. Even if Jacob couldn’t articulate or fully comprehend what just happened, we do know that he woke up to God in a whole new way! God was here, not saying God was in my dreams, but God was here and I wasn’t even aware of it?!!

“When those words came out of Jacob’s mouth, there was no temple in Jerusalem. Without one designated place to make their offerings, people were free to see the whole world as an altar. The divine could erupt anywhere, and when it did they marked the spot in any way they could, although there was no sense hanging around for long, since God stayed on the move.”ⁱⁱ And so what does Jacob do? He looks around to find something that can mark this place as holy ground. And looking around he sees the ordinary stone that he used as a pillow. He takes this stone and sets it up on end so that it is a pillar pointing to heaven. Then he poured oil on the

stone and called this place Bethel which means House of God. **The common ordinary stone has become a sacred pillar and the unnamed location had become the House of God.**

As we sit with the story of Jacob I hear our calling and challenge to wake up to God in a whole new way! When we think of waking up to God the first thing we could consider is taking it literally of how we can include God in our early morning rituals. I remember the old farm house where I grew up. My three siblings and I slept upstairs in the three bedrooms and on various mornings my mother would stand at the base of the stairs and sing to wake us up. She would sing “This is the Day” or “Rise and Shine”. At the time I despised it! She would sing so joyously, while clapping her hands, and oozing radiating joy for the new day! I would cover my head with my pillow and yet I could still hear her singing and calling to get up and greet the day because **God was here**. The first step in finding everyday altars is waking up to God each morning.

While I do not wake up singing, at least not every morning, I do now take one moment to simply say “Good Morning, God. Today IS the day you have made. You are here.” Some days I have to add, “please **help** me rejoice and be glad in it.” And some days one of my dear children wake up before I do and, through the monitors on my nightstand, they make their presence and desires known. But even then I pause, if only for a second or two to start the day by acknowledging God’s presence.

It is important that in our busy full lives we wake up to God each morning and not wake up first to our to-do list, to the stresses that will be ours for the day, to our email, Facebook or Instagram account, to the news. Soon enough we will have to tackle our ‘productive list’ but just for a moment or two in the quietness or loudness of the morning we can pause and remember that God is present and today is the day that God has made.

The notion of waking up to God also carries a much broader understanding and application. Not only do we need to wake up to God each morning, we also need to become more like Jacob and wake up to God's presence in our lives – yes, even through the ordinariness of our daily routines. Waking up to God in our daily lives also means that we need to keep a realistic perspective on what is God's house. If I were to ask you what is God's house, I think that almost immediately our first answer would be the church building. Jacob named the middle of nowhere God's house and declared that there God was present. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book "Finding an Altar in the World" challenges us by questioning:

Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay in 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?... I am not in charge of this House, God's 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. I am a guest here, charged with serving other guests – even those who present themselves as my enemies.ⁱⁱⁱ

Somehow throughout the ages we moved to accept that God dwells in the physical church building, or maybe within the people of the church. But, what about your house? What about in your garden? Is that God's house as well? Taylor reminds us that in scripture we find that

The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other... People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in the whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to a woman kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay.^{iv}

To find everyday altars we need to keep an accurate view of God's house for if we only expect to find or encounter God within the church building, we will never think or anticipate encountering the Living God as we brush our teeth, do dishes, mow the lawn, or read a book to a child.

Our call as followers of Jesus Christ is to become more and more aware and conscious of God's presence with us through the ordinariness of life. Being a follower of Jesus is about being

in a relationship with God; a relationship that is much more than about just going to church once or twice a week. One of the first things that we can do to become more aware of God's presence in our lives is to slow down and look for God. As we race through life we each engage in the battle to remain fully present where we are at. Because of the high paced life we live, and the many internal and external distractions, I believe we miss God and the presence of God.

Author Brian McLaren helps us see that waking up to God and striving to become more aware of God's presence is about life. "It is about training ourselves to become the kinds of people who have eyes and actually see, and who have ears and actually hear, and so experience not just survival but LIFE, capitalized and modified by insufficient adjectives such as real, abundant, examined, conscious, worth living and good."^v McLaren talks about waking up to God in terms of faithing our practices. So instead of using the more familiar language of practicing our faith or faith practices, McLaren introduced me to the concept of faithing our practices. Well, what does this mean? It means we do not need to necessarily add more practices to our already full schedules, but instead to make what we are already doing count. And so he challenges his readers to think through their daily routines and schedules and consider faithing certain daily practices. In his book he speaks of faithing his practices of taking morning walks, making coffee, working out at the gym, or fishing. The point is not that we all have to pick the same practice, but instead that we select something that we routinely do and flag it as an everyday altar to remind us that God is present with us.

I have found several everyday altars in my own life. I already shared my practice of saying good morning to God. Another everyday altar in my life is watering several outdoor flower pots each morning. I have flagged this routine as my pillar of stone pillow to remind me that God is here and this is the house of God. As I fill up the watering can I give thanks for the

flowing stream and ask myself what within me is in need of God's thirst quenching water. Then as I pour the water into each of the pots I breathe deeply and imagine God's flowing stream flooding into the dry and thirsty corners of my soul.

Dishes and laundry are two things that constantly need done because something is always dirty or being used... especially in our house with four young children. And so I made a conscious decision to use these two vessels as everyday altars. I asked myself, okay, how can laundry and dishes become everyday altars for me as flags within the ordinary that God is here? Well, now as I wash the dishes or load the washing machine I pause and think about things in my own life that need to experience the cleansing power of God. And then as I put away the dishes or fold the clean clothes I keep saying thank you to God for God's cleansing forgiveness. With the added blessing of my children I also pray for each of them by name as I fold their pieces of clothing. Now rarely a time goes by that I plunge my hands in the soapy water, or pour the detergent into the washing machine and I don't stop and think "okay God, what in my life needs your healing, or cleansing power? God, you are here, in my kitchen, in my laundry – even and in spite of both of them overflowing with piles of dishes and laundry."

What are or what could become your everyday altars? What are those normal practices in your daily lives that could serve as a sacred pillar pointing to heaven, flagging yet another piece as ordinary earth as the House of God? Perhaps for you it is making your coffee each morning and reflecting on God inviting you to remove your outer shell and allowing yourself to be seeped in the Spirit, bringing out your God flavors. Or perhaps for you it is spending time in your garden – tending to the flowers, the vegetables, and the weeds – keeping you grounded in God's creation as you join in God's creative process. Or perhaps for you it is brushing your teeth and asking God to fill your mouth with godly language and speech. Or perhaps for you it is sharing about

your day over dinner with your family members, highlighting the ways and places you saw God at work in your day and hearing the reflections of your loved ones. What about doing dishes, dropping your child off at school or daycare, knitting, making dinner, exercising, watching the sun rise or the sun set, or taking a shower? What are or what could become your everyday altars? Barbara Brown Taylor asserts that

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 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... 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.^{vi}

Like Jacob we too can “flag one more gate to heaven – one more patch of ordinary earth with ladder marks on it – where the divine traffic is heavy when we notice it and even when we do not.”^{vii} (Taylor, 15).

Finding everyday altars is about waking up and staying awake to God's presence in our lives. It is about being fully present right where we are at, enabling us to live in the moment. It is about being aware of God presence in us, in others we meet – even complete strangers, and in creation – the bird singing her morning song of praise to God or the tree going through the various seasons. Waking up to God's presence means that we literally wake up each day expecting to encounter God in the ordinary, anticipating sensing and being aware of God's presence through the routine and normal practices of life. It is naming the holiness of the ordinary day.

Songwriter Carrie Newcomer has a song entitled “Holy as the Day is Spent.” Within the song she gives voice to her understanding that “Our culture reasons that because we feel there is

not enough time, we should increase our pace, multitask, and fit more into our already overbooked days. But perhaps the more effective response to the limits of time is to live more fully in the moment...^{viii} and to claim the simple, normal, ordinary, parts of our everyday life as holy. Please join me in listening to Carrie's song.

(play song)

As holy as the day is spent. I recognize that we are creatures of habit and that for most of us it will take more than just thinking about having everyday altars to find everyday altars. One of the reasons that Jacob created his altar was to serve as a visible symbol to the world that God was present here. I also choose to believe that Jacob created the altar to serve as a reminder to **himself** that God was here, God is here – God is present. In just a moment I invite you to come to one of the tables throughout the sanctuary and select a small river stone. At the tables you will find stones of all shapes, sizes and colors – each made smooth by the constant pressure of the running water. May these stones serve as tangible, visible reminders that God is present with us through our normal, everyday, ordinary lives. May we take these stones with us and set them somewhere to serve as a visible reminder to us to name and embrace everyday altars; to name and embrace ways of faithing our practices; and to acknowledge, name, embrace, and celebrate God's presence with us through our ordinary experiences of life. As our strings ensemble provide music I invite everyone to select a stone and then in the silence to ask God to bring to mind what part of your daily routines or practices God is inviting you to flag as an everyday altar.

(music)

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- ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (HarperOne; New York, New York), xvi-xvii.
- ⁱⁱ Taylor, *An Altar*, 8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor, *An Altar*, 9, 13-14.
- ^{iv} Taylor, *An Altar*, 12-13.
- ^v Brian McLaren, *Finding our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN), 17.
- ^{vi} Taylor, *An Altar*, 15-16.
- ^{vii} Taylor, *An Altar*, 15.
- ^{viii} <http://www.carriewcomer.com/content/artist>