



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Close of Day

Margaret Fox

Sunday, July 23, 2023

Gen 28:10-19; Rom 8:12-25

I have to confess:

I have a really hard time praying at night.

Morning prayer? I'm all in. I wake up, I'm like, let's do it!

Give me a Bible, a journal, a steaming mug of tea,
give me a psalm or a poem or a paragraph

of CS Lewis or Kathleen Norris or Howard Thurman;

give me a candle in the winter, or the summer sun streaming through the
window,

and I'm ready to go.

It's like that closing song from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, where he sings,

"And I'll be back, when the day is new,

and I'll have more ideas for you,

and you'll have things you'll want to talk about

I will too."

As a kid I would take that quite literally—I would show up in the morning
in front of the TV with whatever toy or stuffed animal I wanted to
talk to Mr. Rogers about—

and I feel the same way about morning prayer—I show up ready to
talk to God.

But evenings—those are harder.

I come home tired,

and all the bits and pieces of the day are floating around in my
mind—

--the tasks left undone ,or partially complete,

the emails unanswered,

the conversations that could have gone better,

the big, looming life questions I was too busy for during the day—

--they all seem to want attention at night, at precisely the point

when I have the least physical or emotional or spiritual energy to deal with
them.

And while I sometimes get into seasons when I develop some kind of
practice—

a candle, a night psalm, whichever of the five questions of the
Ignatian examen I happen to remember—

--this habit is the easiest one for me to set aside,

to pick up my smartphone, or scrounge in the cabinets for sweets—

to seek distraction, rather than devotion, as the day comes to an end.

I know how important it is to have some stillness at the close of day--

—I know that if I don't sit there, with these thoughts,
deliberately before bed,

they'll pop up unbidden, sometime between sleep cycles, usually about 4
a.m.—

--does this sound familiar?

It's not just a matter of spiritual practice, but health in general—

--it seems like every other week there's a new article in the NY Times
about sleep hygiene, where they say, "Limit screentime, don't eat
sweets before bed."

Why is this advice so hard to follow?

I think it can be much harder, spiritually speaking, to let go than it is to take
up—

--to return to God, at the close of day,
that which I'd received so eagerly at its open—

--because doing so involves two hard things:

1) admitting my shortcomings—the things I've done and the things
I've left undone

and 2), and this is even harder—it's because letting go at the end of
the day involves trusting that God is out there working on things, too—

--that all the things that keep me up at night are also known to God,

and that God in fact may be up to something that has nothing to do with my own efforts; that will be a total surprise to me.

The Quaker writer Parker Palmer has a word for this condition;

he calls it “functional atheism,” which he defines as

“the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us.

This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent

is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—

--a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.”

This comes from “Let Your Life Speak,”

a lovely little book about vocation and call.

and whenever I get to this passage I feel a little pang of recognition.

I have a theory that everyone has a pet heresy, and I think that this is mine.

There’s a lovely quote, variously attributed to St Ignatius and St Augustine,

that says, “Pray as if it all depends on God; work as if it all depends on you.”

The functional atheism version of this mantra would be

“ work as if it all depends on you,

worry as if it all depends on you,

and forget that it does not.”

Jacob, in the Bible, is a prime example of this kind of functional atheism at work.

Jacob is the ultimate strategist—

--he's always scheming, planning, anticipating and maneuvering, intervening in the action so that things will go his way.

He's the younger of a pair of twins, and the runt of the family, but through some clever manipulation he connives

his brother Esau into selling him the birthright meant for the older son.

Later, Jacob tricks his own father, Isaac;

taking advantage of Isaac's blindness, Jacob covers himself in sheepskin

to mimic the hairiness of Esau,

and Isaac gives Jacob the blessing meant for the older son.

Now, the text tells us that it was God's plan from the beginning

for Jacob to be the one to inherit the birthright and the blessing

--it's fated, it's meant to be--

but Jacob takes no chances;

Jacob's MO is "trust, but verify."

But all of Jacob's strategizing comes with a cost.

At the point in the story where we meet him today—

--on the road from Beersheba to Haran—

Jacob is on the run—fleeing the displeasure of Isaac and the anger of Esau—

there's no longer a place for him at home.

But he's not just running from; he's also running toward:

Jacob is on a mission—to find a wife, to build a new family of his own;

when he arrives in Haran, he'll encounter the family of his kinsman Laban,

marry and make his fortune.

But not yet.

Today's story finds Jacob in a transitional season,

caught between identities

—he's left behind his family of origin, his role as dependent, as brother and son,

and he's not yet taken on new relationships, new roles as husband and father.

Instead, this is, for Jacob, an empty time, a time between.

And one thing I love about this story is the way

the setting of the passage reflects this—

it happens in an empty, nameless place—

--the text simply calls it "a certain place"

--and at a transitional time—sunset, twilight, the time between darkness and day,

when Jacob stops for the night.

This is what the author Susan Beaumont calls a “liminal season”

--a threshold time between an ending and a new beginning.

Liminal seasons are times when old structures drop away

and new ones have not yet taken shape;

they can be times of grief, as people mourn what is ending,

and anxiety, because we don't know what's coming next,

but also possibility, where new and unexpected ways of being emerge.

They are times of uncertainty, that take us out of our comfort zone,

when circumstances reveal themselves to be beyond our control,

when our functional atheism ceases to function.

These kinds of seasons call not for a tightly controlled program of strategic planning, but instead a more generative, adaptive openness,

a tolerance for ambiguity and intuition,

an attentiveness to what is present and unfolding.

This is precisely the kind of liminal situation in which Jacob finds himself

in our passage from today.

In the Jewish tradition, the midrash, the rabbis suspect that God caused the sun to set early, so that Jacob would have to stop there--

--that God wanted Jacob's attention, wanted him to pause there,

in this liminal moment, this threshold space—

and spend the night.

And Jacob, who has been so active, comes to rest.

There's nothing to do, in this space, no status to jockey for, no advantage to gain—

--and so he takes a stone and lays it over for a pillow,
and lies down to go to sleep.

What a strange thing it is, sleep.

It's such a common occurrence that we rarely stop to think about it,
in fact, just a few hours ago, most of us were doing it.

And seems almost indecent to think about it, right, because here we are,

upright in our pews, prim and proper,

but just a couple of hours ago,

we were passed out in our beds:

recumbent, curled up on our sides,

spread out on our stomachs with our arm dangling over the side of
the bed,

sprawled on our backs with our mouths gaping open, or a C-PAP
mask on—

and wearing some ridiculous outfits— a matching striped suit of
pajamas,

a floor-length nightie, our rattiest old tee-shirt and gym
shorts—

there is something so vulnerable about the condition of sleep.

What a loss of control--

--to lie down and lose consciousness, to surrender our bodies and our minds.

There's a prayer that people used to pray with kids:

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

We don't pray this with children anymore,

but I think there's an honesty in that prayer about how weird sleep is,
how much it involves giving up control.

No wonder children resist going to sleep, no wonder adults find it so
elusive,

no wonder that, in the face of trauma, or anxiety, or grief,
or marital difficulties or financial challenges
or unstable housing or food insecurity,
sleep is the first thing to go.

To sleep is to surrender the conscious alertness on which we depend for
survival—

to endure a temporary loss of functionality,
a gap in memory and time.

It is the consummate act of trust.

And Jacob, this night, is sleeping in the rough--

alone in the wilderness, far from the tents of his family—

exposed to the elements, the animals, whatever occupies this
unknown place,
with no enclosure, no protection, no comfort—
and yet, somehow, Jacob sleeps—and in his sleep, he dreams.

What arises, in Jacob's dream, is a vision, and a voice—

--the vision of a ladder— at least we think it's a ladder—

--the Hebrew word could mean a staircase, or a ramp, or the terraced
pyramid of a Babylonian ziggarnaut—

--but in any case, it stretches upwards, from earth into heaven—

as though Jacob has reached a limit—a place where his functional
atheism ceases to function—

--if Jacob's life were plotted as a graph, this would be the vertical
asymptote,

the place where the graph is interrupted and the curve goes wild,

where none of his inputs will yield a rational result--

and it turns out this disruption is a pathway reaching into heaven,

with the angels of God ascending and descending on it—

--and a voice, the voice of God, offering a name, and a promise,

and most of all a presence: "I am with you and will keep you, wherever you
go."

What Jacob discovers, in this dream,

is that the place he's in is NOT an empty, nameless place—
it's a thin place, a liminal place, a place where the veil between
heaven and earth is especially porous. “How awesome is this place!” Jacob
exclaims. “Surely this is the house of God, the gate of heaven!”

And this time of transition that he's in—it's not an empty, wasted time—
no, it's an encounter with the infinite--

because the God who is with him now has been with him from the
start, and will be with him wherever he goes—past and present and future
collapsed into a single moment.

And this transitional identity—this isolated existence
--no longer son and brother, not yet husband and dad—
--this dream reveals that Jacob is known to and held by the God of
Abraham and Isaac, the God of his fathers—and who will be the God of his
offspring, too.

John Calvin writes of angels not as winged, flying creatures, but as
particular manifestations of the attention of God—as signs that God is
checking in—

and I love to think of Jacob's vision this way,
that he has received this particular attention of God, even in this
liminal time, this empty place.

When the dream is over, Jacob wakes and declares what he has learned:
“surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!” he exclaims.

Takes the stone that was his pillow, and tilts it on end—

a vertical axis, a marker of what he has seen.

And then—and I love this—he goes right back to being Jacob

--he strategizes, plans, seeks to manipulate—

--he's just received this incredible unconditional promise of God's presence,
and he tries to lock it down,

telling God that, if everything God promised comes true, Jacob will return
and build a house for God there, at Bethel—

--as though God needed some kind of added incentive in order to follow
through.

He'll go right back to his ordinary ways—

--acting as though it all depends on him, scheming and strategizing
as he courts a wife and make his fortune.

But there's been a shift for Jacob, here—this night of sleep has changed
him,

this dream vision altered his orientation to the world.

Even though he'll continue to act as if it all depends on him,

he'll now begin to pray as though it all depends on God.

There's a lovely rabbinic tradition about Jacob that comes from this story,

which is that Jacob, of all the patriarchs,

was the one to institute the ritual of evening prayer.

They comment that, prior to this moment in the Biblical story,

no one prayed at night;

the darkness was too dark for prayer; the uncertainty too great.

But in the Jewish midrash, the same verb va-yifga
in the sentence “Jacob came to a certain place”
could also mean prayer, that Jacob prayed in a certain place,
and so they credit Jacob with inventing the practice of prayer at the close of
day.

And I love this interpretation of the story, I love that it is Jacob,
the consummate functional atheist,
who institutes the prayer of letting go,
the prayer of relinquishing control, of releasing the day at its close,
of welcoming the night and the dreams that come with it,
and of trusting in God’s presence to be with us, wherever we go.

I think of our own practice of evening prayer, here at Westminster--
--that liminal time as the sun is setting,
--that liminal place on the lower plaza, between church and street,
--the music blending ancient forms of worship with a bluegrass twang—
and even when I have trouble praying on my own, I love the words we sing
together:

Guide us waking, O Lord,
and guard us sleeping, O Lord.
that awake we may watch with Christ,
and asleep, rest in his peace.

Amen.