

Sacred Spaces

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Texts: Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Genesis 28:10-19a

Fifty-five years ago, my favorite book was published. A couple of years later, my grandmother who was a junior high librarian encouraged me to read it. Almost instantly it became my favorite book... and still is. Many of you also love it, *A Wrinkle in Time* by the late Madeleine L'Engle. About twenty years after falling in love with *A Wrinkle in Time*, my mom gave me a copy of *An Irrational Season*, also by L'Engle. It was her reflections on the liturgical year. I loved that too—and I understand that one iteration of the Women's Book Group here at Frame read it many years ago. Ms. L'Engle was Episcopalian, and as comfortable with the formality of liturgy and the rhythm of the liturgical year as with the wildness and wonder of the cosmos. L'Engle's reflections on faith, both intuitive and theological, both questioning and deeply trusting, certainly laid the foundation for who I became as a Christian. Her experience of the world as a holy and magical place, and of God as both utterly dependable and unfathomably mysterious led me to understand the world, God, and myself differently than I would have otherwise. L'Engle's ability to blend a good story with deep spiritual reflection is captivating. Among her many books was a trilogy of reflections on Genesis. The second of these books was titled *A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys with Jacob*; it offers her reflections about Jacob, the wily trickster who was nonetheless one of the patriarchs. Genesis is one of the great storybooks in the Bible, after a couple of versions of the Creation story, and the story of Noah and the flood and a few other ancient folks, the rest of Genesis, from roughly chapter 12 through chapter 50, are about the patriarchs, the first four generations of men and their wives who are the ancestors of the Hebrew people, and the spiritual ancestors of both Jews and Christians.

Earlier this summer we had two sermons about the first of the patriarchs, Abraham, who with his wife Sarah settled in the land of Canaan, precursor to both biblical and modern Israel. God had promised that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky – and it took a while, but eventually their son Isaac was born.

Isaac was the father of twin sons, Esau and Jacob. It was said that Esau was born first but that when he was born, Jacob was holding Esau's heel – he was just a little behind Esau and grasping to catch up. He remained grasping for much of his life. We'll be spending time with Jacob today and for the next two weeks. But some of the best stories about Jacob came earlier in Genesis, before today's story. I should say that some of Genesis is like a manual in bad parenting and that's not just when Abraham almost sacrifices his son Isaac. In the passage of Genesis that introduces the twins Esau and Jacob, there are these verses: "When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac [the father] loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah [the mother] loved Jacob." You don't need a whole lot of training in family systems to suspect that there is going to be trouble between these two.

By mid-August, we'll be reading about Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who was known to be his father's favorite – again, who might guess that having an obvious favorite among one's 12 sons might lead to difficulties? As I said, Genesis is not a great source for parenting advice, but it is a collection of wonderful stories.

In ancient times, a younger brother was at a real disadvantage – the eldest son received a larger part of the family inheritance. So Jacob, the younger son, his mother’s favorite, the grasping one connived to cheat his older brother. First, one day when his brother came in from hunting, Jacob had made a lentil stew which smelled delicious. Esau was famished and begged to have some – and Jacob said he could have it if Esau would give his birthright to Jacob. Lentil stew is one of my favorites, too, but this must have smelled amazing, because Esau agreed.

But his giving up the birthright wouldn’t have meant anything unless his father also agreed to it. One day, their mother Rebekah heard Isaac tell Esau that he thought his death might come soon, so he asked Esau to go hunt and prepare him a stew, and Isaac would bless him. Rebekah pulled Jacob aside, told him to go get a couple of the family goats, and she cooked up a stew, then dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothes, and sent him in with the stew to trick Isaac, who was mostly blind by now. Esau had much more body hair than Jacob, but Rebekah dressed Jacob in the goat hides where Isaac would touch him, so that he would feel the hair of the goat and believe it was Esau. The trick worked, and Jacob received the blessing from Isaac, an affirmation that he would receive the larger share of the inheritance.

But, in winning the inheritance, he lost his brother. Esau was understandably first grief-stricken at losing his father’s blessing, and then enraged at Jacob. He threatened to kill him. So Rebekah sent Jacob away to stay with her brother Laban. And while Jacob was traveling to Laban’s, having left his mother, his father, and his brother, he had this wondrous experience during the night.

Madeleine L’Engle shares that the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joseph Heschel wrote: “indifference to the sublime wonder of living’ lies behind all the sorry evils” of the twentieth century.¹ I don’t think humans are all that different in modern times than we were in ancient times. Genesis tells us that Jacob was a man of the tents, while Esau was a man of the fields. Perhaps Jacob got out of touch with ‘the sublime wonder of living’ as Heschel describes it. L’Engle reminds her readers of the origin of the word ‘disaster’ – it is dis-aster, ‘dis’ meaning separation and ‘aster’ meaning star, (coming from the same root as astronomy) dis-aster is separation from the stars². If we are separated from the stars, we have become detached from the wonder of the cosmos, the consciousness of creation, our interdependence with others, the awareness of God’s presence in and around us. And this detachment leads to all sorts of disasters in our world – and breaches in relationships between people, between people and the earth, between people and God.

“Surely God was in this place and I did not know it!” exclaimed Jacob after his dream—had Jacob perhaps lost sight of the stars and the night sky while he was wreaking disaster in his family? Was he so involved with his own doings that he had become oblivious to the work and wonder of God?

Abraham Heschel goes further in his explanation of our disorientation from ‘the sublime wonder of living’ – he continues: “Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which only has to be organized in order to be mastered.”³ Like Jacob, many of us grow preoccupied with our own efforts at control and mastery of our circumstances,

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, *A Stone for a Pillow: Journeys with Jacob* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publisher, 1986), 133.

² L’Engle, 17.

³ Abraham Heschel in Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Stone for a Pillow*, 133.

and we lose sight of wonder, we set aside the awareness of the presence of God in the world, in our own lives, and we grow too busy for awe.

A recent study found that people who regularly experience wonder and awe have lower levels of proteins called *cytokines* which are precursors to excessive levels of inflammation. Chronic inflammation can lead to a number of poor health conditions, particularly autoimmune disorders such as diabetes, arthritis, asthma, multiple sclerosis, lupus, and a variety of other, even more serious, autoimmune disorders. Autoimmune disorders are on the increase in our country.⁴

Wonder is often seen as a childlike quality – Jesus spoke about being childlike in order to receive the kingdom of God. How do we regain that ability to experience wonder and awe? One way is to practice mindfulness—which at its most basic is just remaining present to each moment as it comes. Many of us find ourselves frequently revisiting the past – with anger, regret, or guilt – or looking constantly toward the future with anxiety or fear. One of the defining characteristics of Jesus was his ability to pay attention to the moment he was in and to stay present to the people he was with. Practicing that kind of presence to the present moment is one way to practice mindfulness. It is developing the mental skill of paying attention. If you are washing dishes, don't let your mind wander to your to-do list, or the conversation you had earlier—be present to the sensation of water on your hands, to the scent of the soap, to the view out the kitchen window.

And when you are walking the dog, pay attention to the gardens that you walk past, to the sensation of the breeze in your hair and the sun on your skin. Paying attention is step one toward experiencing wonder on a regular basis.

And it is also a key to experiencing God. As we pay attention to the fullness in each moment, we can find ourselves experiencing more joy as well as more wonder. The writer Dallas Willard wrote one of my favorite quotations in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*:

Your life is not something from which you can stand aside and consider what it would have been like had you had a different one. There is no “you” apart from your actual life. You are not separate from your life, and in that life you must find the goodness of God. Otherwise, you will not believe that he has done well by you and you will not truly be at peace with him....First we must accept the circumstances we constantly find ourselves in as the place of God's kingdom and blessing. God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being “right,” we will simply have no place to receive his kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments are our life.⁵

Paying attention to the moments of our lives is how we learn to experience to wonder and awe. And as we pay more and more attention, perhaps our experience will shift from that of Jacob to that of the psalmist who was keenly aware of God's presence in every moment and place in his life.

⁴ Traci Pedersen, “How Feelings of Awe Lower Inflammation” February 18, 2015, http://spiritualityhealth.com/blog/traci-pedersen/how-feelings-awe-lower-inflammation#at_pco=wnm-1.0&at_si=591a3b4e91471ea1&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=0&at_tot=1

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Discovering Your Hidden Life in God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 340-341.

It's not only in the Bible that we get the message to pay more attention to the moment. Other wisdom traditions offer the same teaching. I'm taking a yoga workshop online, and one of the sessions is on yoga philosophy and the ancient traditions that modern yoga came from. And the teacher explained that one of the things he has come to appreciate is the opportunity in yoga to turn away from a progress model in which you are constantly striving for some more perfect form that is out of reach, but instead it is an opportunity for each of us "to intimately participate in the wonder of our own existence."⁶ Striving, he points out, is focused on an awareness of what we don't have. I would say that blessing, on the other hand, is focused on an awareness of what is present now.

Jacob wasn't taking time for wonder... until he was in a crisis, and flat on his back, with a stone for a pillow, seeing the stars and experiencing his dream. How often are we too busy with the things we're trying to control, or manipulate, or manage so that we give up wonder? And how might our lives be transformed by simply paying attention to each moment as it occurs. I say "simply paying attention" but of course, it isn't simple. We have become an attention-deficit culture, and we have to learn again how to pay attention.

And it turns out, according to the authors of *Staying Sharp: 9 Keys to a Youthful Brain through Modern Science and Ageless Wisdom*, that learning to control our attention is essential to maintaining our cognitive abilities as we age, and also to experiencing joy and happiness at any age.⁷ This makes sense when we think about it, because learning to pay attention gives us the opportunity to practice gratitude. We become aware of the blessings abounding in the actual life we are living! Try taking even 10 minutes each day when you consciously pay attention to what you are experiencing during that time, whether it is washing the dishes, walking the dog, weeding the garden, or listening to music. Really pay attention: notice if your mind wanders and bring your attention back and that practice will begin to help you to be present more of the rest of the time.

As we pay attention to each present moment in our lives, as we take time for 'intimate participation in the wonder of our own existence' [J Brown], as we practice noticing 'the sublime wonder of our own existence' [Abraham Heschel] we can reconnect to the larger life of which we are a part, to the life of the cosmos, to the life of God, to the presence of God. And whether we have a transcendent experience like Jacob's or not, we can trust – as did the psalmist – that God is in each place we find ourselves, each place becoming sacred space and wonder becoming another spiritual practice that leads to greater fullness in our lives, to the abundance and joy that Jesus said he came to give us [John 10:10, John 15:11].

Surely God is in our lives all along—can we notice? Amen.

⁶ J. Brown Yoga Workshop "Gentle is the New Advanced" Session 3 (available through <https://jbrownnyogavideo.com/workshop>)

⁷ Henry Emmons, MD and David Alter, PhD, *Staying Sharp: 9 Keys to a Youthful Brain through Modern Science and Ageless Wisdom* (New York: Touchstone, 2015) Chapter 3 "The Power of Attention"