

Little Altars Everywhere: Commemorating the story of God with us.

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Genesis 28:10-19

From antiquity, humankind has been known to be a people of stone. Stone Aged, we lived in them, commemorated our lives on their faces, cooked with them, stacked and towered them, threw them, built with them, fashioned them for the hunt, for the tool, for the weapon, we inhabit one; this third rock from the sun.

Do you have some? I have saved a few that have worked their way up from the earth where I stood. One is a brick chunk that was from the original hall of Baldwin on Truman's campus. When in 1924, a fire destroyed it, the lake was drained to put out the fire and the

brick rubble was shoveled into the lake and covered with earth to make a grassy quadrangle where we met. When it was excavated for something in the 70's I picked up this relic. It felt significant for me in this season of my life; this brick that seemed to ask me if **I knew the story?**

We have found arrowheads. How many of you have held them as they seemed to ask, "**do you know my story?**" I have a rock slice that a friend gave me from Kathryn Hepburn's estate sale; a beautiful rock that Kathryn Hepburn picked up so when I hold it, I have a brush with greatness and **I wonder about her story.** Our kids have rock collections of quartz, turquoise, that are beauties, gems that glisten, sparkle or were polished that **were mined from the wordless earth that speaks wonders** (They are still in your closet you know.).

They even have some that are said to be petrified dinosaur bones...John Huntly, you will have to check these one out to **see if you can tell the story.**

This last one I found in the dump when I was a girl. Painted on it is a monk with a spired church over his left shoulder. In the top window is a flame the same color red as the candle flame in his hands...now **that one is telling a story.**

Our faith story has a rocky past. Rocks rolled away that we might see to eternity. We know Jesus as the Rock; redeemer, cornerstone, on which we stand, and build.

Jesus asks the one without sin to cast the first stone at the accused, and one by one the rocks are laid down.

David slays a giant of a man with a slingshot pelted rock and begins the journey to his kingship.

The people were ready to stone Moses (Exodus 17) when God went before him to the rock at Horeb. There Moses, as instructed by God, struck the rock with his staff and water poured out to a people who were dying of thirst and asking, **“Is the Lord among us or not?”**

I want to ask both these questions: Can a rock tell a story? And Is the Lord among us or not?

In today's scripture Jacob takes an odd bed fellow; a rock for his pillow. Anyone here tried a rock for a pillow. Maybe it is warm from the heat of day but there's just no way for this to be comfortable. So I began to wonder, what could be the significance of the rock?

Does this rock have a story to tell?

I thought this rock might be Jacob's dis-ease. It might be that rock in his gut that won't let him sleep. "He took one of the stones of the place; he put it under his head and lay down in that place." (Genesis 28:11).

Have you ever gone to bed with dis-ease? We are warned to not let the sun set on our anger. (Ephesians 4:26) Yet anger is not always dissolvable in a day. Sometimes even in a life time.

When our children were young, we abided this sun down rule. We had them work through their anger before they went to bed. They would have to sit on the couch holding hands as they moved from sneers to snickers and talked their anger out. The problems of childhood may be more solvable, more forgivable.

We tried not to expose them to our adult strife and to be honest, sometimes *things* hadn't changed in the night, but I might have.

Now that we are empty nesters, I know that there are times when I need to sleep on my anger. The surrender to rest can be a balm and things can look better in the morning. But then, as Dana Fritz once described to me, when you wake, there is that instance when you don't yet remember your trouble. Then that taste comes into your mouth and you ask yourself, "What is this?" as the strife pours itself again into your waking conscious. But for a while, even your trouble was laid to rest, or sometimes not. The warning here could read..."Don't let the sun go down on your anger ...because you will not rest...and you will wake up with a pain in the neck."

Let's examine the source of Jacob's anger.

Last week we learned that Jacob lay in wait for the chance to lure his more primal minded, starving brother into giving him his birthright for immediate gratification of a delicious stew. It got worse when Jacob, with the help of his mother Rebekah, disguised himself with animal skins and his brother's clothes and his ill and blind sighted father gave the blessing that should have gone to the first born son, his brother, Esau.

Instead, it was misguidedly give to Jacob under false pretense. And there are no backsies in blessings that grant rights and authority to the person receiving it.

But there is bad blood now between Jacob and his manipulated brother and the tricked father. Now Esau is threatening to kill Jacob and their mother maneuvers their father, Isaac, into sending Jacob alone, back to her

hometown, to find a wife and to begin the next chapter of his life among other relatives.

Jacob is on the run from the consequences of his actions both physically and mentally...and there is a rock in his gut as he lies down.

I'm not sure if he is repentant, but he is likely angry.

Angry that, just because he was born on the heels of his twin brother, he was not the favored one of his father.

Angry that in this culture of patriarchs, he is more like his mother and less relatable to his father.

Angry that his brother does nothing wrong in their father's eyes and is a better shot.

Angry that his brother is big enough and mad enough to get the best of him, and likely kill him.

Angry that he has to leave the homeland, that he should now be privileged in, because everyone knows, including himself that he has ill-gotten gains that he can never live into and will likely die because of.

So he flees, alone and in the desert just north of Jerusalem and he comes to this place called Luz, or light and he will later name it Bethel, or House of God. The sun is setting on his anger and he seeks rest.

Anger is a bad taste in our mouths. It is not just the bible that teaches us about its bitterness, it also runs in opposition to our souls and our longing for peace.

Some of us cower from anger.

Dustin used to clasp my cheeks with both palms when I was mad and say,

“Mommy no angy.”

Yet anger is not a foe, it should be a teacher. In facing our anger and mining it from our bowels to the surface, we can uncover and discover some real strength, awareness and even beauty.

Our sinful natures, not a lot unlike Jacob’s that seek to secure our wellbeing and often at the expense of someone else’s, are part of our humanness.

We live and breathe as a people who are very differently minded and often wounded. We lash out when something happens because of hate, recklessness, indifference, intention or injustice.

We react most angrily to the behaviors of others that reflect that which we fight against in ourselves or to that which we most defend as a value in ourselves, or that which we try to control. |

We abhor most, that which we recognize as in need of healing, yet is sickeningly present in a given person or situation.

And we shut down or bristle up, making matters worse.

What if we could condition ourselves, when we feel this anger, to welcome it, to build an altar where it will be opened up, offered up and laid down.

If we dismiss or cover over our stony feelings of anger it can make us sick. In addition, we will never ask ourselves,

“What is this rock saying to me?”

In my current class, Utilizing Conflict, we have talked about our chief responses when conflict arises. They are sometimes in combination and sometimes a predominant response is identified.

The responses are:

compassion , cooperation, directing, harmonizing or avoiding.

In today’s story, Jacob is avoiding and in this case, that is a good idea. He is running from this conflict and an interesting thing happens to him in his sleep.

He dreams a vision of a ladder where the angels of God are coming and going from heaven to earth.

I’m imagining a two way escalator but he just didn’t have words to explain it.

Earth and heaven are not separate as his culture may have taught.

This is what the Celts call, the thin space, where heaven and earth meet. And there, standing beside him, not shouting from on high or letting the angels speak to Jacob, is God.

God stood *beside* him with an introduction,
“I am the Lord, the God of your grandpa
Abraham, your dad Isaac, and I’m telling you,
this land you lie on, is still for you and your
generations.

And they will be like the dust of the earth...you
might remember that Abraham’s promise was
for his children to number as the stars, and
now Jacob’s as the dust.

God continues to tell even the beloved,
cheater Jacob that his progeny will spread to
the west, east, north and south and all the
families of the earth shall be blessed in his
offspring.

God is still being true to the sacred promise to
Abraham and his descendants and Jacob is a
part of that promise to be with him and to
keep him, flawed as he is.

I hear the words of my mother in law,
“Remember who you are.”

So that sun going down on anger just may be
the opportunity to welcome God’s presence
into our most vulnerable state of sleeping and
in our dreaming.

As the sun goes down, we pray.

Now I lay me down to sleep. Pray the Lord my
soul to keep. Guard me safely through the
night. Wake me with the morning light.

Sleep is a thin space.

There is another thing that is common in Celtic tradition and that is the building of a Carin. It is a stack of stones to mark a place of significance. It could be a trail guide, a burial site, a place of loss, or leaving, or of being found, of joy, of a gift or an epiphany, of a brokenness or beauty, a devotion, a plea, or it may just be a sort of Kilroy was here.

Through the ages, peoples have built these altars pointing and sometimes reaching into the sky as holy as altars under the spires of cathedrals.

You will see them once you begin to look. They are often on shores, or hills, in gardens, along Caminos, or high places.

When he woke, Jacob set his anger pillow up for a pillar in the desert where it could **tell its story**. He poured oil on it in and named the place Bethel, God is here.

Jacob woke and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it (Genesis 28:17).

The question of the people of Moses who drank water from the rock, “**Is the Lord with us or not?**” is answered by Jacob for all of us, at our own Bethels... “Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it, how awesome”.

Do you have some? Rocks...of anger? Are you feeling outcast?

Stack some stones,

build an altar,

rest,

mine your anger out,

and discover the gift it might be.

For Jacob, it was his aloneness, his character flaws, his resentment toward his family, his woundedness.

He laid down with his anger and rose up with a transforming of God being with him,

heaven and earth intersecting in constant flow, fulfilled promise,

a God-honoring of family generations past and those to come that include all of we who are adopted children in Christ.

It was a rock and it became an altar which mined out, with the help of God, a precious promise.

Can a rock tell a story?

Is the Lord with us or not?"