

## “AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD”

Job 12:7-10; John 1:1-5

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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

I didn't write a sermon for you all today. I spent the first part of the week trying to think of an Earth Week sermon that wasn't, as we say, preaching to the choir. You all know all the factual reasons we should walk lightly on the earth, reduce our footprints, change our squandering ways. And most of you have already begun to change your lives and will continue to change.

Then on Thursday, I got a new book. *An Altar in the World*, by my favorite theologian and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor. It's a wonderful book. I recommend it to all of you. And to further tempt you, I am going to read an excerpt from it this morning, a section that speaks to the theology behind the theologies of caring for creation, a beautiful articulation of the oneness of God's world, a message particularly for us church people, that is taken from the first essay in the book. **So, from here on, these are Barbara Brown Taylor's words from *An Altar in the World*.**

Many years ago now, I went for a long walk on the big island of Hawaii, an old trail that runs along the lava cliffs at the edge of the sea. More than once the waves drenched me, slamming into the cliffs and shooting twenty feet into the air. More than once I saw double rainbows in the drips that fell back into the sea. The Island won my heart. Part of it was the sheer gorgeousness of the place, but the ground also felt different under my feet. I was aware of how young it was: the newest earth on the face of the earth, with a nearby volcano still making new earth even as I walked. . . . I could feel the adolescent energy of the lava rock under my feet. The spirit of that land was ebullient, unrefined, entirely pleased with itself. Its divinity had not yet suffered from the imposition of shopping malls, beach homes, or luxury hotels. I caught its youthfulness and walked farther than I thought I could, ending up at a small tidal pool on the far southwestern tip of the island. . . .

Walking around the pool, I came to three stones set upright near the edge where the water was deepest, . . . with the tallest one in the middle. They announced that something significant had happened in that place. I was not the first person to be affected by it. Whoever had come before me had set up an altar, and though I might never know what that person had encountered there, I knew the name of the place: *bethel*, House of God.

At least that is what Jacob called the place where he encountered God, where he saw something that changed his life forever. The first time I read Jacob's story in the Bible, I knew it was true whether it happened or not. There he was, a young man, running from home because his whole screwy family had imploded. His father was dying. He and his twin brother Esau had both wanted their father's blessing. Jacob's mother had colluded with him to get it, and though his

scheme worked, it enraged his brother to the point that Jacob fled for his life. . . .When he had walked as far as he could, he looked around for a stone he could use for a pillow.

When he found one the right size, Jacob lay down to sleep, turning his cheek against the stone still warm from the sun. Maybe the dream was in the stone, or maybe it fell out of the sky. Wherever the dream came from, it was vivid: a ladder set up on the earth, with the top of it reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending it like bright-winged ants. Then all of a sudden, God was there beside Jacob, promising him safety, children, land. “remember, I am with you, God said to him. “I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.”

Jacob woke while God’s breath was still stirring the air, although he saw nothing out of the ordinary around him: same wilderness, same rocks, same sand. . . .“Surely God is in this place,” he said out loud, “—and I did not know it!” Shaken by what he had seen, he could not seem to stop talking. “How awesome is this place!” he went on. “this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. . . .” Looking around for something that would mark the spot, he saw the obvious choice: his stone pillow, lying right where he had left it. He stood it up, ladderlike, and set it into place. Then he poured oil on it and gave it a name: Bethel, House of God.

Sitting in my salty, fragrant church back on the big island of Hawaii, I looked at the three stones pointing straight up through the sky and wondered how I had forgotten that the whole world is the House of god. Who had persuaded me that God preferred four walls and a roof to wide-open spaces? When had I made the subtle switch myself, becoming convinced that church bodies and buildings were the safest and most reliable places to encounter the living God?. . .

I had loved plenty of churches in my life by then. I encountered God in all of those places, which may explain why I began to spend more time in churches than I did in the wide, wide world. . . . We did things together in those church spaces that we did nowhere else in our lives: we named babies, we buried the dead, we sang psalms, we praised God for our lives. When we did, it was as if we were building a fire together, each of us adding something to the blaze so that the light and heat in our midst grew. We did our parts, and then there was more. There was More.

That, at least, is how it looked to those of us who had forgotten that the whole world is the House of God. . . . Somewhere along the line we bought—or were sold—the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion. We believed that God’s home was the church, that God’s people knew who they were, and that the world was a barren place full of lost souls in need of all the help they could get. The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do. What if the gravel of a parking lot looks as promising to God as the floorboards of a church? What if a lost soul strikes God as more reachable than a lifelong believer? What if God can drop a ladder

absolutely anywhere, with no regard for the religious standards developed by those who have made it their business to know the way to God? I could not possibly say. . . .

As important as it is to mark the places where we meet God, I worry about what happens when we build a house for God. Do we build God a house so that we can choose when to go and see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at 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? What happens to the people who never show up in our houses of God? The people of God are not the only creatures capable of praising God, after all. There are also wolves and seals. There are also wild geese and humpback whales. According to the Bible, even trees can clap their hands. Francis of Assisi loved singing hymns with his brothers and sisters—who included not only Brother Bernard and Sister Clare, but also Brother sun and Sister Moon. Francis could not have told you the difference between the “sacred” and the “secular” if you had twisted his arm behind his back. He read the world as reverently as he read his Bible. He did not know where to draw the line between the church and the world. For this reason among others, Francis is remembered as a saint. The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. Sea monsters and ostriches live in it, along with people who pray in languages I do not speak, whose names I will never know. . . .

I am not in charge of this 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. Like Job, I was nowhere when God laid the foundations of the earth. I cannot bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion. I do not even know when the mountain goats give birth, much less the ordinances of the heavens. I am a guest here, charged with serving other guests. There is only one House. According to the Talmud, every blade of grass has its own angel bending over it, whispering, “grow, grow.” How does one learn to see and hear such angels?

If there is a switch to flip, I have never found it. As with Jacob, most of my visions of the divine have happened while I was busy doing something else. I did nothing to make them happen. . . . My only part is to decide how I will respond, since there is plenty I can do to make them go away, namely 1. I can figure that I have had too much caffeine again; 2. I can remind myself that visions are not true in the same way that taxes and the evening news are true; or 3. I can return my attention to everything I need to get done today. These are only a few of the things I can do to talk myself out of living in the House of God.

Or I can set a little altar, in the world, or in my heart. I can stop what I am doing long enough to see where I am, who I am there with, and how awesome the place is. I 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 I notice it and even when I do not. I can see it for once, instead of walking right past

it, maybe even setting a stone or saying a blessing before I move on to wherever I am due next. .

Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognize the distinctions we make between the two. 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 the House of God. God gave Jacob visions, so Jacob could see the angels going up and down from earth to heaven, going about their business in the one and only world there is.

The visions 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.