

Making Space for God

Invocation

Almighty God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Ash Wednesday prayer from the Book of Common Prayer

Looking to the Past

Take some times to settle yourself. Invite the Lord to guide and direct your thoughts for the day. Think back over where you have been this last month. Review your journal. What burdens, emotions, and concerns do you carry? What are you thankful for? When have you experienced the Lord's presence? Journal your thoughts and offer these to the Lord.

Scripture Reading—Return to Bethel—Genesis 35:1-15

The place where you were born; the location of your first school; the site where you were standing when you heard some dramatic news; the spot where you surrendered your life to Jesus. All of us have a personal geography—places on the planet where our lives were changed forever. For the patriarch Jacob, Bethel was the place where he became aware of the presence of God for the first time. It was the setting where the dream that animated the rest of his life was born. The first time he visited, he was a young man on the run, alone, frightened, and with a season of acquisition ahead of

him. On his second visit, he was an old man on the run, with his family, and a season of relinquishment ahead of him. Take some time to slowly read the passage through a couple of times. If something grabs your attention, stop and talk to the Lord about what you see.



*Return to Bethel, Mixed Media on Paper, 11x14,
Steven Stuckey, 2016*

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do you identify with Jacob on his second return to Bethel?
2. Do you have a Bethel in your life? (A time and place where God felt especially real and close)
3. In preparation for meeting God at Bethel, Jacob asked the people to surrender their foreign gods to him so he could bury them. What are the things you trust in that distract you or decrease your awareness and reliance upon God?
4. On the first visit to Bethel, God said to Jacob, "I am the God of your grandfather Abraham and your father Isaac. On the second visit to Bethel God said to Jacob, "I am God Almighty." God got bigger. How has God gotten bigger for you as you have grown older?
5. Draw a simple map and note the sites of your own personal geography.

Reading for Reflection

For centuries people prayed for a messiah, a superman, to come and display a power and a glory that would overpower evil; but what they got was a helpless baby lying in the straw. And when that baby grew up, they wanted him to overthrow the Roman Empire; instead, he let himself be crucified. We haven't changed much in what we expect of God.

The Passion and the Cross (Ronald Rolheiser)

Our infidelities, our lack of gratitude, our lack of prayer, our propensity to misunderstand and to hurt each other, our need to lie and rationalize, and our excessive self-preoccupations, occur mostly because what's best in us, the image of God, lies frozen and lifeless inside us. Our poverty and bitterness come from that. And so we begin to settle for second best. We make do: a life without enthusiasm, without fire, with passion quieted, with joy frozen. We despair, not by suicide, but by protest, protesting that our lives are without new possibilities: "If you really knew what my life is like, you wouldn't tell me I could be happy!" Eventually, hope fades into agnosticism. Agnosticism invariably turns to despair. Bitterly, we accept our limits: "This is the way I am, this is the way things are, this is the way it has always been. This is the way it will always be!" Nothing can surprise us anymore. We know what is possible for us, and what is possible in no way approximates our dreams.

The Passion and the Cross (Ronald Rolheiser)

One reason that the requirements of the kingdom are both difficult and light is the necessity to shed the Pharisaic outer mask. The mask is the person we pretend to be—the false outer personality that we turn to the world, but that is contradicted from within. The mask is that which conceals our real thoughts and feelings, and which we come to use so habitually as a way to hide from others and ourselves that we become unaware we have assumed it.

The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meanings of Jesus' Sayings (John A. Sanford)

When we are agitated, reactive, or depleted, our inner world is in pain and in need. Ignoring the state of our soul and pressing to cultivate compassion for another is not only counterproductive but also a form of interior violence. It dismisses the needs and suffering that are crying out from within us. Forcing an open heart toward others while closing our own hearts to ourselves is as internally contradictory as screaming our way into silence, straining our way into relaxation, or battling our way into inner peace. The cry within us will only intensify and demand our attention in other ways, such as compassion fatigue, an intractable resentment, or a chronic knot in our neck.

Practicing Compassion (Frank Rogers Jr.)

Even the Western God is assertive, vocal, and dominant; his son Jesus is kind and tender, but also a charismatic, crowd-pleasing man of influence (Jesus Christ Superstar). It makes sense, then, that Westerners value boldness and verbal skill, traits that promote individuality, while Asians prize quiet, humility, and sensitivity, which foster group cohesion. If you live in a collective, then things will go a lot more smoothly if you behave with restraint, even submission.

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking (Susan Cain)

Benediction

My God and my love, you are mine and I am yours. Deepen your love in me, O Lord, that I may learn how joyful it is to know you and serve you. Let your love take hold of me and raise me above myself, that I may be filled with devotion because of your goodness. Then I will sing to you a song of love. I will follow you, and my soul will never grow tired of praising you. Amen

Thomas a Kempis