

Seeing God's Spirit everywhere in the world

The Spirit didn't come down at Pentecost. Eyes were opened to God's presence.

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I sit with Brother Martin Gonzales, over sixty years a monk and reflecting on the nearness of life's end. We are at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey on a day when the perfume of magnolias stretches across the way and birds sing, as he reiterates words he likes to share: "I don't care what anyone says, but the spirit world is the real world. Just think about your life. I mean, at one point you weren't. Just think about that, because most people don't. At one point, you weren't. And you have this spirit..." Here he talks about the body as different from spirit, referring to our collection of cells constantly dying and changing, transforming us from youthful to elderly; the cells that started with our parents. "Your parents made you," he continues, "but the spirit part of you came from somewhere else. They didn't give it

to you.”

In the story of “Jacob and the angels,” Jacob journeys on the road from Beersheba to Haran when he stops to camp. As he sleeps, he dreams of a stairway connecting heaven and earth, with spirit-beings traversing the rungs of the ladder—up and down. Then God speaks to him of the relationship God has with Jacob’s people, reminding him how they will thrive. Beside himself with terror and wonder, Jacob wakes. He exclaims, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:16–17). He builds a pillar-altar at the site to mark *Beth-El*, the house of God.

The collection of stories that is the Bible is also, in its anthological form, a mega-narrative chronicling a movement of human understandings of God. At its core, this movement is the slow drawing-close of God, with views of God as remote, above, or far away gradually giving way to understandings of God as not only near but also within, or *in*-herent in creation. Christian theologians who later reflect on the story will come to see the soul as the house of God, and the Christ as the very essence of God seeded throughout creation and brought to awareness through the intuition of this man named Jesus, who came to recognize it in himself and surrender to it, and thus to speak and act as one with God. It is truly a remarkable progression!

Our tale of Jacob at Bethel, and the revelation of his dream, marks one breakthrough step of understanding in that long arc of breakthroughs. As the dream shows Jacob, God is right there with him. Before this “he didn’t know it!” One could say he quickly misses the point when he sets up a pillar-altar and names the site Bethel. But it is one starting place. And because Jacob as a character represents the human ego-preserving tendencies so perfectly, we almost need him to miss the point. It is what his character does. Yet in that juncture, we nonetheless move on from understandings of God as remote and distant.

Some might say the biblical arc chronicles changes in God’s relations with humanity, and that the arc culminates in God’s act of coming near. This view comports with understandings of the Bible as God’s very words transcribed by humans. But I don’t see it this way. The Bible is written by people, and the arc of the book reveals the arc of their dawning awareness. God doesn’t change; people do. The presence of God didn’t change with Jesus, it was always “right here.” It was always *in*-herent. The spirit did not “come down” in one particular place at the event we call

Pentecost, the spirit was always present everywhere. But at Pentecost, eyes were opened.

How would seeing the world as enchanted with spirit, or imbued through and through with God, change how we operate on a daily basis, how we live in this world? It seems that when we have experiences of God's presence, we are often surprised. Like Jacob we say: God is here and I didn't know it! Like Jacob, we want to build altars on those places. We tell the story, or cherish the memory, consecrating that moment in time, instead of recognizing that all of time is consecrated, and what set those times apart was the opening of our eyes.

All of time is holy—because God is both alongside us and within us. How would seeing this change the way we participate in meetings at work, or fold the laundry, or cut and eat the bell pepper, or relax with a story or a companion come evening, or interact with those in need? So much of the time we are like Jacob: trudging along, waging our little battles, then we are “out of nowhere” bombarded by spirit. We are reminded that God is right here. And sometimes we are faced with the power of God-disguised-as-man, so we wrestle him and hang on to our agendas until we are so broken and out of joint that we think God blessed us for our tenacity (Gen 32:22–32). When all along, we were already blessed.

Often when I look out on certain situations or people, I perceive the lack of a mega-story telling them about this enchantment, telling them they are the very seat of God—an integral part of God. And without the story, people are tragically unaware and unrooted. Like Jacob, God is right with them and they “didn't know it.” We don't know who we are, or what it means to live a good life, or what life even amounts to. On the whole, modern people trudge along like what we see with our unskilled eyes is the whole story, when it isn't the half. I see this as a failure of many things, but perhaps most importantly, a failure of storytelling.

What stories might we take up and start to tell anew? Not stories employed like battle axes to drive home three key points. But stories that enlarge our imaginations, ever so gradually equipping us to see how enchanted this whole world is, how enchanted we are. *Once upon a time, you weren't...*

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