

“Asleep on Holy Ground” / Genesis 28:10-19a / 20 July 2014

Isn't it amazing, the dreams that grow inside us while we're sleeping? Isn't it marvelous, the hopes that blossom and come to life, the truths that whisper themselves into the ears of our subconscious when we're paying no attention whatsoever? Isn't it beautiful, the growth that occurs when no one is looking, when all the living world is asleep, like that undeserving trickster, Jacob? Our best growing comes to us when no one is watching. It comes in the night when hope itself is in short supply.

There's a game that is sometimes played by people who have children under ten years of age. The game is called “Can You Believe Our Parents Used to Let Us Do That?” It's a simple game with no winners and no losers—unless of course the losers are all the aging parents who raised their kids in the 70s and 80s and who allowed them to do things that no modern parent would ever allow. The game is typically played at dinner parties after a few drinks, when there's been a lull in the conversation, and one of the kids—who've all been sent outside to play—comes in to ask if they can climb a tree or go to the playground down the street, or do some other thing that's completely out-of-the-question. A protective mom or dad says “No, of course you can't play with the neighbor's dog. Go play video games on your iPods.” The disappointed child rejoins the other kids, and invariably one of the parents says, “Can you believe our parents used to let us play with strange dogs?” And poof! Game on!

“Hey, can you believe our parents used to let us go home from school with kids they didn't even know? Can you believe we used to go door-to-door by ourselves to sell candy bars for Scouts? Can you believe our parents used to let us go out and play with friends all day long on Saturdays? We'd disappear in the morning and come home at dinner time. Our mother and father would go a whole day without even seeing us. They didn't know if we were manufacturing bombs or getting bullied, and it didn't worry them a bit. Hey, can you believe our parents used to let us go swimming by ourselves, without sunscreen?” Of course, the game is all the more fun because each nervous mother and father in the room is running to the window every ten minutes to make sure they can see where their child is. “Can you believe our parents used to let us build bike ramps out of spare plywood, so we could fly like Evil Knievel? Can you believe our mothers used to leave us sitting in the car to read comic books while they ran inside to buy groceries? We weren't allowed to eat our Halloween candy until they checked it for needles, but we were allowed to ride in the trunk of the station wagon or even the bed of a pickup truck. Seat belts? I didn't even know cars had seat belts until the 1990s.”

My own brothers and I had real bows and arrows. We would shoot an arrow straight up into the sky. When the arrow started to come back down, we would run under it with a cardboard box and try to catch the falling arrow with the box, like a moving target. The risk was part of the fun. We used to hide on old freight trains in hopes they'd start moving and take us out west. I remember hanging upside down from monkey bars that were installed right above concrete slabs. I remember building structurally deficient tree houses, setting off firecrackers, sliding around on icy ponds, setting old toys on fire, picking and eating berries that we identified ourselves, berries that grew along slippery shale cliffs in the strip mines, and getting chased through the same strip mines by feral dogs, crawling through storm drains, exploring abandoned buildings, nearly falling through ruined floors. There were latchkey afternoons and untold adventures with strangers, and animals, sharp objects, and water, and fire, and dangerous heights.

Now, if you're a parent who used to let your children do any of those things—or who still lets your children do those things—please don't feel judged. Part of the fun of this game for cautious modern parents is being reminding of just how neurotically protective we are. My own kids can't even play in their own back yard without me checking on them every twenty minutes. Which approach is worse? I recently had an occasion to walk down the railroad tracks between Heidelberg and Carnegie on a summer's Sunday afternoon. For part of the distance, the tracks ran alongside Chartiers Creek, and the mossy smell of freshwater joined with the tar smell of the train tracks (and just a hint of raw sewage) to conjure up an old, long-dormant sense of freedom in my spirit, a childlike joy that lives

deep in my memory. It smelled exactly like a 1970s childhood in Western Pennsylvania. It was a perfect day for playing outside—which is what I was doing—sunny and cool. But I had to wonder, “Why am I the only person playing on the railroad tracks today? Where are all the kids who should be riding their bikes, and climbing trees, and shooting at soda cans with their slingshots? Are they in their houses playing Angry Birds when real birds make the world's soundtrack out here?”

Now, I'm not suggesting that we give our kids bows and arrows and cardboard boxes. That was foolishness. And yet, which is healthier, to be Huck Finn or Little Lord Fauntleroy? My point is this: We who play the game “Can You Believe Our Parents Used to Let Us Do That?” we are the very people who benefit from having been raised in ways that we would never raise our own children. Not only did we survive the old ways of being a child, but we learned creativity from them, and self-reliance, a sense of awe and adventure. Just because our parents didn't witness our every move doesn't mean they didn't love us. Even without a nervous parent hovering at all times, we grew up and became caring, responsible human beings. Sometimes the best and the healthiest growth occurs when no one is looking. It happens on its own, unbidden, unannounced.

You may recall last week we met the twins Jacob and Esau. Esau was a few minutes older than Jacob, so he stood to inherit all their father's titles, and belongings, and blessings. In exchange for a pot of lentil stew, Esau promised all those rights to Jacob, but when it came right down to it, Esau did not expect his little brother to hold him to that promise. But Jacob did expect it, and he took matters into his own hands in order to make sure of it. When it came time for their elderly father to pass away, Jacob—with his mother's help—sneaked in to the dark room where the old man lay, mostly blind. Jacob tricked his father into thinking that he was Esau and got the old man to lay his hands on him and give him the blessing that was meant for Esau. In today's reading, then, Jacob is on the run because his older brother, Esau, wants revenge.

Oh, Jacob, dreaming deceiver! In the night of his troubled sleep, he dreams of angels and the voice of God. “You're a sneak-thief, Jacob, you're a trickster. And yet, I have plans to bring good out of your sins. You might have stolen your brother's blessing, but unlike your father, I have more than one blessing to give. Through you, though you would steal blessings, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Sleep on, Jacob, sleep on. And never stop dreaming. Little do you know that you're asleep on holy ground, that your destiny will be met in the very path you've taken to avoid it. You cannot see it until you're awakened, but even while you slept, while you dreamed of your own glory, while your brother dreamed of revenge, when no one was looking, God was quietly at work to heal a broken world. You were sleeping on holy ground.

And don't we sleep on holy ground, you and I? Isn't it while we're asleep, or distracted, or all unawares; isn't it while we're busy with our own thing, lost in the details of our daily grind, looking the other way, all caught up in our own worries and plans; isn't it while we're not looking...that God transforms even our mistakes into blessings for ourselves and for our world?

Now I think I know what some of you might be thinking: What about the venerable old doctrine that says, “What comes around goes around”? If anyone ever deserved to be smacked down for his misdeeds, and denied his high ambitions, it was this deceptive fellow, Jacob. He's not a nice guy. Jacob's out to advance himself, and he doesn't mind stealing from his simple, trusting brother in order to get ahead. In fact, I'd kind of like to see him get his just reward for what he did to his brother and his elderly father. If “what comes around goes around,” then why does a shyster like Jacob get anything at all? Can you feel safe in a world where the wicked don't get what's coming to them, but instead even they are included in the very blessings they tried to steal by betraying the people who trusted them most? But what if people really did get only what they deserved? There's some truth in the statement that you reap what you sow. Most people nowadays use a Hindu expression to speak about the notion that people who sow evil or unhappiness into the life of the world will certainly reap the same in their own lives. They call it “karma.” Actually, karma is far more complicated than most modern spiritual cherry-pickers know, but Boy George and The Culture Club made the doctrine famous back in 1982

with their song “Karma Chameleon,” and the word has been in use ever since whenever someone wants to describe the phenomenon of cosmic revenge, when misbehavior is punished—seemingly by the universe—for example, when the guy who leaves his wife for a younger woman gets left when he grows old, or when the guy who steals a car ends up driving the same car into a light post. I don't deny that there is a strain of justice at work in the world that often rewards bad deeds with misfortune. Indeed, before receiving this promised blessing, Jacob, too, would suffer plenty for his crimes. But think about this: If bad deeds spring from deep unhappiness—and we must admit that Jacob had reason to be unhappy, given the twisted dynamics we see in his family—if bad deeds come from our unhappiness, then it all becomes a downward spiral. The more miserable you are, the more wickedly you behave, and the more wickedly you behave, the less joy you know. This is the deadly cycle that creates despair in the Middle East, in the Gaza Strip, the Ukraine, in impoverished neighborhoods of our own city, in our relationships, and in our hearts. That's why karma isn't enough. In order for there to be second chances, and forgiveness, and transformation, in order for any of us to get past our own mistakes, there has to be something more than karma. Something or someone has to reach into our life and break the deathward cycle of always reaping what we sow!

Grace. It's called grace. Where would any of us be if not for second, and third, and fourth chances? Grace doesn't have to be fair. It doesn't have to make sense. Grace suspends all the rules in the name of compassion. Three men arrived at the pearly gates. St. Peter said to the first one, “Welcome, I see in my book that you've led an upstanding life, honest, giving, loving, always faithful to your wife. Congratulations, you will travel through heaven in a Cadillac.” To the second man, St. Peter said, “You've lived a decent life, but oh dear, I see here that you took the occasional break from your wedding vows. You'll travel around heaven on a motorcycle.” To the third man, St. Peter said, “Whoa! How did you get here?” “Beat's me” said the man. “I cheated on all my wives.” Peter replied, “Then you're here by the grace of God. You can have a bicycle to ride around heaven.” The third man, pleased with his luck, was pedaling down the golden streets when he saw the first man weeping behind the wheel of his Cadillac. “What's wrong?” said the cyclist. “You lived a good life and you've been rewarded for it.” “Yes,” said the guy in the Cadillac. “But I just saw my wife going by on a skateboard.”

Consider all the healing, all the growing, consider the transformation that takes place when no one is looking. The cells of your body regenerate themselves while you sleep. Plants, too, do their best growing in the dark. “The night brings counsel,” as they say in Africa. Sleep itself can convey new hope and new vision for all the same old problems we faced the day before. Consider all the old regrets that you nurtured so long, the old, old hurts that never healed because you made them fresh and new each day, the attitudes that kept you stuck in all the wrong places...until one day, you returned to the spot where you left that regret, or that hurt, or that wound, or that attitude, and you found it wasn't there. Somehow in the night, when no one was looking, it went away. Healing occurred, growth, forgiveness, grace! Like resurrection itself, if does its work unseen, in the night, when—like Jacob at Bethel—all the world is asleep. Grace sows forgiveness, and mercy, and second chances into the fabric of a cold, karma-driven world. It creates exceptions to the ironclad rule of punishments and rewards. It calls the dreaming deceiver, Jacob, into the very blessing that he tried to take by force.

And it calls you! God is not merely the punisher of wicked deeds and the rewarder of the just. God is the power of resurrection, the force for good and renewal at work in all the world. God is the force of life that death itself cannot defeat, bringing beauty out of chaos, meaning out of tragedy, new life out of death itself. God is the tendency toward rebirth, at work in the dark, when we assume that all is empty and all is dead.

Our best growing comes to us when no one is watching. It comes in the night when hope itself is in short supply. What does grace mean for you? It means at least two things: First, it means that perhaps you are asleep on holy ground even today. If you find yourself in a nighttime of the soul, grace is at work in the present moment, making a way forward for you. And secondly, it means that if you,

like the deceiver Jacob, have been a recipient of second and third chances, if you have received compassion and blessing even when you did not deserve them, then you must share them with others