

THE GATE OF HEAVEN

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Grace Church in New York
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Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "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." (Genesis 28:16-17)

I will never forget the first time I set foot in Grace Church. I can tell you the exact date because I was keeping a diary at the time, chronicling my first semester at General Seminary. It was September 18, 1986 – over thirty-four years ago. I'd been in the city for just a few weeks, and was eager to experience the variety of Episcopal churches in Manhattan, all seemingly within blocks of each other. If I recall, it was a faculty member who recommended that I really ought to go see Grace Church. So it was that on a Thursday morning, after an errand to the bank, I walked this way and when I found the Broadway doors open I stepped inside. I'd already seen some of the prominent Manhattan churches and was duly impressed by their size. But here were proportions so pleasing that it took my breath away. The diary entry reads: *Went over to 10th and Broadway and saw Grace Church. A beautiful place, and I intend to go there as soon as I can.*

Shortly thereafter I learned something about Grace Church that only increased my desire and longing to enter this house of the Lord. You see, in those days Grace Church had a reputation – a reputation that had nothing to do with the architectural proportions, the preaching, or the history. Grace Church was known as a place where young, single people would congregate and meet other young, single people. In fact, I discovered that a group of my new friends at the seminary were already coming here on Sundays. The ringleader was a fellow-student named Rob, and he explained that the place to sit was in the north transept, in view of the door by the baptismal font. Why there? Because just before 11 am, through the door would parade all the young, beautiful people who had attended the adult class in the reception room. My confession to you is that throughout the fall of 1986 I was one of those unholy seminarians in the north transept, with my mind drifting between heavenly and earthly things. I dare not quote my diary entries for those Sundays. Needless to say, the patriarch Jacob captured my thoughts when he declared: *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*

Today's reading from Genesis is especially appointed for the anniversary of a church. We've heard the familiar story of Jacob's ladder. To this point in his life, Jacob was not what you'd call a righteous person with his mind set on heavenly things. His diary entries would not be suitable for polite company. In fact, he was a trickster who recently had swindled his older brother Esau out of their father Isaac's birthright. Esau was furious, and Jacob had fled the family home in fear for his life. He was on the run. One night, somewhere between Beersheba and Haran, he decided to rest until the morning. He was alone and outdoors and had no bedding, but only a stone for a pillow. In his sleep he dreamed a most extraordinary dream. He saw a ladder set in the earth and extending into heaven. On the ladder angels were ascending and descending, and from it the Lord, the God of Abraham, spoke directly to Jacob. Jacob had never before spoken with God. To be sure, he'd heard about God from Isaac, but now a second-hand faith became a first-hand experience.

We love the story of Jacob's ladder, and here in Grace Church the window in the northwest corner of the nave depicting the scene is the one that people often identify as their favorite. The reading and the window suggest that heaven and earth are not divorced. Heaven is not far off and inaccessible to the earth, but the two realms coexist and overlap and intermingle with each other.

What is more, God conspires with the material order – with stones and places – to open the eyes of our faith, as if these common things were the gate of heaven. Indeed, when Jacob awoke he did not say, “Wow! That was quite a dream.” No, he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place.” Then he took the stone, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it, and consecrated it as an altar to God. Thus, it would be recognizable to all as a sacred space, as a house of God. The stone and the place were sacred, even sacramental. They were the gate of heaven.

It was 175 years ago today, at this very hour, when the glorious pile of stones that surround us was consecrated as a house of God with all that that entails. On March 7, 1846 a capacity congregation filled these very pews. For most of the people it was the first time they had set foot in this place, the second home of Grace Church. By some accounts it was an experience of sensory overload. Many had never seen a building quite like it. New York was obviously a smaller, different city than it is today. This neighborhood, even though on the brink of rapid development, was still somewhat suburban. Small homes dotted open green spaces. The lot on which the church was built had been an apple orchard. Try to imagine the city and the nation on this day in 1846. James K. Polk, the 11th President of the United States, had been in office for one year and three days. The Civil War was still fifteen years in the future. Abraham Lincoln was working as a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois.

At 11 o’clock in the morning a procession of ecclesiastical dignitaries left the home of Dr. Samuel W. Moore at 767 Broadway, where they had been invited to assemble. (Today the address is part of a Staples office supply store.) No service bulletin survives from the day, and the reason may be that such worship aids hadn’t yet come into fashion. What we know comes largely from our parish history book printed in 1923, which itself relies on newspaper articles covering the event. When the procession had crossed the street and reached the doors of the church, the Bishop of Michigan, Samuel A. McCoskry began the consecration service from the Book of Common Prayer, presumably the 1789 American edition. Why the Bishop of Michigan and not New York? Because the Bishop of New York, Benjamin T. Onderdonk, was under suspension for reasons suggesting that the more the world changes, the more it stays the same. The choir was located in the west gallery, from which the livestream ministry emanates today. From there they sang at least one anthem and some Psalms, “accompanied by the rich tones of a very fine organ” that had been relocated to the gallery from the first church. After more prayers and Scripture readings, it was time for the sermon.

The Rev. Thomas House Taylor, the 4th Rector of Grace Church, climbed into the pulpit, which in those days stood at the top of the chancel steps, directly in the center. In his hand he carried a manuscript of approximately 5,000 words: a sermon that must have taken at least forty minutes to preach. Fortunately, copies of the sermon survive, and I’ve read it several times over the past week. Taylor was undoubtedly a colorful character, and he came out ready to rumble. It was as if he anticipated the critics who would view with alarm the opulence of the building. So he wasted no time in reminding the mostly wealthy gathering that setting apart for God “*only that which is coarse and mean,*” while they themselves lived in luxury would be selfish, ungrateful, and faithless. It would not be a spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God.

Taylor went on to set forth a case that the splendor of the building served a larger purpose. It was a means to an end. Although today’s reading from 1st Peter apparently wasn’t part of the service 175 years ago, its message resonates with what Taylor had to say. The purpose of these stones was to open the eyes of our faith, and help us all to grow into the full stature of Christ. *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen as precious in God’s sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:4-5).* In Taylor’s reckoning the glory of the place fit neatly into a grand and godly plan. People would set foot in this building and it would fill their minds with awe. It would fire them with “*a secret determination always to love what is great, holy, and divine.*” It would elevate the moral character of the young and developing United States. Thus it was nothing short of a patriotic duty to erect ten-thousand times ten-thousand houses of worship all across the expanding frontier – which now included Texas, a parcel of land we’d recently

stolen fair and square from the Mexicans. In truth, Taylor had nothing to say about the Mexican War, but he lacked no confidence in the power of sacred space to lift us all *“above the fascinations of base and brutal joys,”* and set us all on a *“journey along the narrow way toward the gate of heaven.”*

But what about the poor who couldn't afford to be pew holders at Grace Church, or any other church for that matter? Anticipating the question, Taylor proposed that they, too, had a role to play in providence, as God worked his purposes out from year to year. The poor, he said, can take the same inspiration and moral encouragement as anyone else would derive from the opulent monuments to religion. In addition, the poor can also rejoice that they won't be harassed by the burden of ongoing care for these structures. The leaking roofs and peeling plaster of the future won't be their problem. Instead, the glory of these buildings should awaken the poor to a high duty of their own. With their spirits uplifted, the poor should *“cry aloud”* to their richer neighbors, and *“admonish”* them that their work was not finished. The building should inspire the poor to say, *“This is magnificent. Now come see how those on the lowest rungs of the ladder live.”* The poor, said Taylor, must carry the rich *“to the narrow lanes of our city where poverty dwells, poverty ghastly with disease, and famishing in wretchedness.”*

Taylor was building toward a specific call for action. He announced that his purpose was to lead the parish on *“from one good and glorious work to another, perhaps more really good, perhaps more truly glorious still.”* What was his idea? It was to construct yet another church in the narrow lanes where poverty dwells. *“Give me the means,”* he said, *“of building, and preparing for the most efficient and most immediate operation, Grace Church Chapel, a church in which the Word and Sacraments shall be administered according to our forms, and the sittings shall always be free, to all who will use them for their souls' good.”* He pressed his case by tracing the generous legacy of the parish through three of his predecessors. Then he said, *“In 1834 the care of this large congregation of souls passed into the hands of him who now so feebly addresses you.”* He reminded them that they had never let him down, and charged them not to flag in their zeal for the house of the Lord. Sure enough, within a few years they had established the first of many Grace Chapels, where the sittings were always free.

In 2004 the care of this large congregation of souls passed into the hands of him who now so feebly addresses you. Since then we have done much to restore the fabric of this building. We have worked to give it every chance for continued service as a ladder between heaven and earth, as a gate of heaven for another 175 years. We have enjoyed – yes, enjoyed – three major and two minor capital campaigns. And in looking at a job left undone, especially the peeling plaster in the south nave aisle, I can assure you that the day is coming when I declare, *“Give me the means for another round of restoration.”* Trust me, it will be fun!

Some days I think that God has a wonderful sense of humor. You see, two years after I first set foot in Grace Church I became the seminarian here for my final semesters at General. My goal was to learn as much as possible about parish ministry, so one day soon before graduation, I was listening in on a conversation between some Fabric and Grounds members as they walked the nave. Apparently, some workers recently had drilled into one of the gothic columns to anchor something to it, but discovered that it was filled not with any solid material, only with dust. I distinctly remember leaving that meeting thinking, *“Woah, I'm glad that's not my problem.”*

Dear People of God: this building is not my problem, and it is not your problem. This building is not anyone's problem, but part of the solution to what ails the world. This building is our joy and delight. *“Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*