



6: Hold Loosely



*And did thy wealth on earth abide,
Didst fix thy hope on mouldring dust,
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
Raise up thy thoughts above the sky
That dunghill mists away may fly.
Thou hast a house on high erect
Fram'd by that mighty Architect,
With glory richly furnished
Stands permanent, though this be fled.
It's purchased and paid for too
By him who hath enough to do.
A price so vast as is unknown,
Yet by his gift is made thine own.
There's wealth enough; I need no more.*





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*Farewell, my pelf; farewell, my store.
The world no longer let me love;
My hope and Treasure lies above.*

Anne Bradstreet, 'Upon the Burning of
Our House, July 10th, 1666'

Weary. So weary. They had been through an ordeal – a lifetime of bitter servitude, a season of daily hope-dashing, a narrow escape. They'd rejoiced, but the exhaustion was catching up with them now. For days, they hiked, uncertain of their destination. It was hot; they carried all of their belongings, corralled their children and their livestock, fought the scorching winds. They slept on the hard ground, tossing and turning, gazing bleakly at the vast sky above. They were sticky, uncomfortable, and homesick. What they wanted above all was a home of their own, a place to put down roots, laugh around the dinner table, gather the grandkids, pursue a vocation. But even this grand dream paled in comparison to one nagging irritation: they were hungry. And it was impossible not to complain.

'I wish we had died in Egypt,' said some. 'I'd rather be a slave that eats well than starve in this godforsaken desert,' said others. Moses began to regret being saddled with the whole whiny lot of them, but God had compassion. In the evening, a feast – quail, flocking to be the main course of a campfire picnic. And in the morning, a marvel: during the night it had snowed baklava, honey wafers as far as the eye could see.





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‘What is it?’ they gasped, and gathered it up by the basket, enough for all, but never too much.

‘Don’t hoard the manna,’ boomed Moses. ‘More is coming. Use what you can eat during the day, and leave the rest. Trust.’ But of course the Israelites didn’t listen; who could trust for more? This manna was good. Better to stock up, stash it away, hold tight. And in the morning, mmmm. The manna they’d greedily saved up was maggoty, foul and rancid. What it was wasn’t so good any more.

I have been a manna-hoarder. I have gathered my baskets of joy with weary feet and greedy hands. Oh, Lord, so tired, so hungry! And this – what is it? – is so delicious, but so fleeting. How can I know there is more coming?

As John Eldredge says, I have attempted (again and again) to arrange my own little heaven here on earth, but it can’t be done. The breathtaking moments won’t be snatched, the castles (sandcastles, all) won’t stand. The people I love most dearly spring up like wildflowers on a Colorado mountainside and fade away.

One weary day, the weight of a homesick city on my shoulders, we packed a snack and headed an hour out of town, up to Golden Gate State Park in the Colorado foothills. As we drove, I practically pressed my nose to the glass of our car window, ‘pierced with many pangs,’ longing, *longing* to live in one of the small highway-hugging houses en route to our hiking spot. The yards were generous, spread apart, green, shaded by scrawny aspen and overgrown spruce. Children playing outside could





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look across the street and up and see deer, see mountain, see nature. No neighbors drunk and fighting. No vulgar graffiti. This was it, my dream. Pack the U-haul, head west.

We quarreled in the car. I was begging, pleading for this dream. I laid out the pros and a couple of cons for the sake of pretending fairness. I listed the health benefits, the parenting plusses, sweetened my words with all the allure of a long-cherished wish. Forfeit our calling? No, no. We could commute. We could office at home – we already did, in fact – we could stack the coffee-house appointments all in a row, we could... But it was not the right time or the right place and I knew it, knew this was a me-plan and not a God-plan, knew it was the bursting of a heart sick with hurts and broken dreams, burnout and battle fatigue.

We'd just had bad news – the kind that feels like betrayal. We'd cried out to God and heard only silence. We'd traveled a long way and still had miles to go. Top it all off with an absolutely appalling tragedy down the street – a movie theater shooting that took too many lives, right there where we'd taken our children to see *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *How to Tame Your Dragon* – oh my goodness. I wanted out; I wanted to go home.

We hiked all day, me dragging along behind, realizing numbly that I was missing it all, the white bark against the green backdrop, the laughter of the kids, the sun and shade and wind. It was what I wanted, freedom and beauty and quiet, but like Moses' entourage, I grumbled for more.





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I began, as we hiked, to notice the summer wildflowers – Indian paintbrush, black-eyed Susan, fairy trumpet, phlox and flax. I gathered a posy the color of sunrise and sunset, carefully cradled it all along the trail, gently leaned the stems against the cup holder when we made it back to the car, gazed at the bright blossoms as we merged back into six lanes of city traffic, popped them in a vase as soon as we walked in the door. I'd captured my moment, gathered my manna. By morning, all of my flowers were brown and dead.

It doesn't do to grasp for happiness. Happiness is slippery; joy is deep-rooted, firmly planted, reaching deep into a secret source of water and strength to outlast drought and storm. Happiness is fleeting; joy is ever-lasting. Joy, gift of God, is patient – contented, not contingent. God richly gives us all manner of good gifts to enjoy, but not to hoard. Everything under the sun is slip-sliding away.

Whatever we gather to answer our hunger will leave us hungry except the Bread of Life. We were made to hunger. Christ, the Bread of Life, nourishing, delicious, satisfying, invites us to feast. Maybe it's because I'm a bakery-loving girl with a sweet tooth, but I love this image of Jesus as Bread. There is hardly anything else in the wide world more wonderful than a fresh loaf – eggy challah, dense pumpernickel, airy croissants, honey wheat rolls, steaming popovers. And the only proper thing to do with such a treasure is to gather around the table with anyone in the vicinity, ooh and aah and pass the butter. Christ offers hearty,





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tantalizing, down-home goodness. I will satisfy your hunger, He says. Taste and see – I am good.

Maybe the disciples had been pondering this mouth-watering idea for a while when the Last Supper rolled around. What is it to follow Christ? Nothing less than life, rich and full, abundant, satisfying, triumphant. They'd seen this Messiah take the bread, give thanks, break it, feed 5,000. Enough for everyone. Peter might have thought, Let's get Jesus to make us some snacks to sell at a mountaintop rest stop. Heaven on a plate. But then the picture changed a bit.

This is my body, Jesus said at that final meal, startling them (again). He lifted it up, gave thanks, broke it. Take, eat. Do this in remembrance of me. Now the Bread of Life was the bread of suffering, of sacrifice. It was Passover; the lambs had been slaughtered, the blood painted on the door; everywhere the smell of roasting meat rose smoky in the air. Jesus was not just the bread, He was the Lamb.

Like Peter, like the Israelites, I would like to hoard the manna, pop up a tent on the mountain, savor the bread. I would like to avoid the sacrifice, loss, and heartache. I have got to learn to hold loosely.

Not everyone agrees. 'Hold fast to dreams / For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly,' wrote Langston Hughes. There is something to be said for hanging on tight, especially to dreams. It is difficult to maintain a dream through drought and storm, and the hope attached to the dream can slip away. But really, the





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dream isn't what we need to hang on to, it is the giver of dreams.

God, giver of dreams, once gave a dream to a man named Abraham. Dream of a child, He said. Dream of a boy to make you laugh. Dream of grandchildren, one for every constellation in the sky. The years passed, the dream seemed unattainable. Abraham tried to help God along, arrange for a miracle. That was a bust. Hagar, Ishmael, the whole embarrassing debacle was the result of Abraham's and Sarah's volunteer event-planning on God's behalf. But God had a bigger event in mind. Finally, finally, the dream came to pass – a child, laughter. Still God wasn't through. Just when Abraham relaxed into a happy retirement, God spoke again. Lay the dream on the altar, commanded the dream giver. Give it up. Sacrifice your son.

What did Abraham love more, the gift or the giver? Could he trust the heart of a God so shocking? Or would he grab on a little tighter, hold fiercely to the dream, to the child, to the love? Abraham holds the boy loosely, and clings to the Father. His faith is astonishing.

Have faith, we say flippantly, scrolling the word in pretty font on shower curtain and tissue box. We've gotta have faith, faith, faith! sings George Michael.

Writer Virginia Stem Owens says,

'No one, I'm convinced, should be allowed to claim faith who knows where his next meal is





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coming from or where he will sleep tonight. Faith is a word we should fear to have on our lips, lest it be defined for us in ways we cannot imagine. Kierkegaard would go farther. You should not talk about faith, he would say, unless you are prepared to stand, like Abraham, with the knife raised over your child's body.¹

Um, not so sure about that kind of faith. Can I get a refund on that shower curtain?

Owens goes on to say that Abraham might have obeyed, woodenly, with resignation, yet without faith. That is to say, he might have hardened his heart against God even while he stood prepared to kill the dream. 'The problem with resignation, as opposed to faith, is that it kills joy... Resignation can only receive its children back again with pain. Only faith produces joy.' Had Abraham not believed in his gut that God was good and trustworthy would his act of obedience have been bitter and cold? Could it have wounded his love of God permanently?

I know about resignation. Climbing sadly back into the car, driving with a sigh back up the driveway in the city, looking at the distant purple ridge and wishing I were there. OK, God, I have said with a loud exhale, here I am. Obedient Kate. Killing the dream. Go ahead, God, you can have it.

1. Virginia Stem Owens, "Søren Kierkegaard: Desperate Measures," in *The Classics We've Read, The Difference They've Made*, ed. Philip Yancey (New York: MultiMedia Communications/McCracken Press, 1993), 71. Owens, writing about Søren Kierkegaard's classic, thoughtfully unpacks the Danish philosopher's work, applying it to her own circumstances.



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This is not thankfulness. It isn't faith, or joyful surrender. It's my deep mistrust of the heart of the giver concealed under the facade of dutiful doing. Clearly, it's not holding loosely, it's a pity party, a poisoned pity party at that, fed by devious whispers as old as Eden. God is holding out on you, Satan still hisses.

Yet God is the giver of all good gifts, who gives more than we could ever ask for, hope for, or even imagine. He gives the desire and then fulfills it in grand style, heaped up, pressed down, running over. He brings me to the banqueting table, and His banner over me is love (Song 2:4). When it seems I have to give up the dream closest to my heart, I have to remember the character of the sovereign God of the universe. He has not abandoned me nor forsaken me, forgotten my prayers nor ignored my needs. I am simply asked to treasure Him first.

Interestingly, the story of Abraham's great test follows closely on the heels of the cautionary tale of Sodom and Gomorrah found in Genesis 19. Lot and his family, cozied up to sin in a lifetime of compromise, were forced to flee for their lives, give up their possessions, friends, and dreams as their infamously wicked homeland burned to the ground. The surrender was not so freely given in their case; Lot's wife, unable to let go, turned back with longing to gaze at what she'd lost. We do not know her name; we remember her as she died, a picture of misplaced desire, a pillar of salt – thirst, unquenchable. Her legacy to her daughters was also desire, corrupted. Living with their old, defeated father in seclusion, the daughters longed





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for Life. Rather than bring this request to God, they seduced their father, daughter-initiated incest, bearing sons whose descendants (Moabites and Ammonites) were the sworn enemies of Abraham's descendants for generations.

Lot's wife could not let go, because she did not hold loosely, and did not trust in a loving Father to provide. Abraham, on the other hand, did not regard the son he loved as his own possession in the first place. Tears in his eyes, he raised flint above his precious child to literally sacrifice this dream to God. '[B]ecause you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice,' declared the Lord.² Through the faith of a man surrendered to God, through his radical trust and posture of openhandedness, the whole world has been blessed. Anything Abraham thought he would have to give up was given back to him, multiplied, enriched, magnified. And God was greatly pleased.

The gut-wrenching obedience of Abraham is a beautiful picture of the gospel: a son given for sacrifice. Whenever we give our cherished treasures to God, we hear the echo of all that was given for us; we remember that He, not sparing His own Son,

2. Genesis 22:16-18, (NASB)





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graciously gives us all good things. Usually our own holding loosely is not nearly so painful or dramatic. Prying our fingers from the little idols hurts, but not much, not for long.

Generally the challenge to hold loosely hits me in the nitty-gritty, minute-by-minute choosing to let go of my expectations – not the grand dreams, but the ‘hey, I was supposed to have a minute of peace and quiet here!’ How often my day is spoiled because someone else’s need edges in on my plans. What I most frequently grasp too tightly is my freedom, my perfect schedule. Me first. Putting it in perspective – life is short, all is God’s, I’m just here to serve – can help. If I stay alert for divine appointments, regard nothing as interruption, I can roll with a little grace. Nate Saint said, ‘If God would grant us the vision, the word sacrifice would disappear from our lips and thoughts; we would hate the things that seem now so dear to us; our lives would suddenly be too short, we would despise time-robbing distractions and charge the enemy with all our energies in the name of Christ.’³ Whoa. This is a guy who gave it all. What’s a little interruption in comparison?

But I’m just gonna be honest here, it’s really hard to put that into practice. Even without realizing I’m doing it, I’m making plans. What rises up inside me, day after day, is selfishness, which is why I need to be filled with Spirit, rooted in Spirit-love and

3. Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010).





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letting Him produce Spirit-fruit: patience, peace, gentleness, and my favorite, joy. Fill me up with joy and I won't need to go grabbing for it.

This summer I've been spending extra time meditating on John's metaphors for Jesus. Earthy, simple, profound, beautiful, and endlessly thought-provoking, these word-pictures have added richness to my prayers and my understanding of God. They also train me to let go.

- Hold loosely to my possessions, because Jesus is the Bread of Life. He will satisfy my deep needs.
- Hold loosely to my wishes, because Jesus is the Living Water. Drink deeply, and I will never thirst.
- Hold loosely to my expectations, because Jesus is the Vine. If I am still, He will produce fruit.
- Hold loosely to my home, because Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He will lead me, feed me, protect me, guide me, take care of me, welcome me into green pastures.
- Hold loosely to my family, because Jesus is the Lamb of God. He has already given more than He will ever ask of me.

It has been a long road. God called us to plant a church in a downtrodden suburb of Denver, and we – assumed. Assumed God had big plans for us, and by that, big plans for our church. And what





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are the big plans of God if not for miracles and wonders? We have been flummoxed by the glacial slowness of God, His quiet refusal to act in the ways and according to the timetable we set for Him. We have suffered setbacks, and more setbacks, discouragement, attack, frustrations, confusion, and the deafening silence that greets our desperate prayers. Yet God did not release us – we were stuck. That summer of the shootings was our low point. But in the middle of a hard, hard season, good news. We were given the chance to take a sabbatical, our first big break after thirteen years of ministry.

So we found ourselves in Massachusetts, a time to reflect, a time to study. It was balm for our scrapes, rest for our weary souls. We met with God, heard His voice again, walked by the quiet waters. It was a gift – not the one we were looking for, but nevertheless a huge, amazing gift. Still, it was fleeting.

We toured historic sites in Boston, Plimoth, Stockbridge. We stood in an Ipswich Cemetery and marveled over graves from the 1630s. Our guide was Dr. Garth Rosell, a professor of church history from nearby Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Under the canopy of trees, he read off headstones and told us of the lives hidden beneath the etched names. Here a pastor from the earliest settlement, there a wife, ‘most amiable companion’ to her mate. Pointing to one of the many original houses lining the Ipswich streets (now with Volvos parked out front) he told us that once upon a time, Anne Bradstreet lived there.

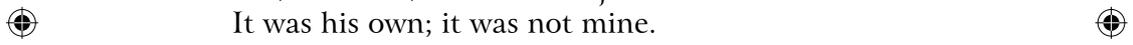
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Freshman English class came rushing back; Anne Bradstreet was our earliest American poet, one of the only women to be published in that day and age. Known for her devoted love to her husband she led the charge for women writers. Dr. Rosell pulled out a worn book and read her words to us there in the solemn cemetery, reminding us of the incident that led to the poem. When, in 1666, the Bradstreet home burned to the ground, Anne and her husband Simon lost everything, including her precious library of books. She wrote,



And when I could no longer look,
I blest His grace that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was his own; it was not mine.
Far be it that I should repine.

Standing there where the roots of great old trees coil around ancient bones beneath the earth, Anne's words had great resonance. None of her possessions were really her's, and the house crumbled to ashes was not really her home. She understood. Even as she stood under the dark sky and smelled the smoke of her treasures rise to blot out the stars, she knew it was never hers to keep. She lifted her empty hands and surrendered it all to the Lord.

Anne held loosely her dream of home. Could I?

So quickly our time away wound down. The little bubble of time, suspended above and separate from our life, was thinning, thinning, ready to pop. And then it was over. We were going home.



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Home – the thing I want above all, the ache for it sinking deep into everything I do. Madeleine L'Engle said, 'We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home, but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams, or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes.' Of course, the home we were heading to after sabbatical didn't feel like home, wasn't really Home at all. It was certainly not my dream of a mountain cabin, but having rested, I felt more able to relax into it than I had for a while. There in Massachusetts, I pictured the light (Jesus, Light) filtering through the tree in the front yard, fresh-baked bread (Jesus, Bread) steaming on the table, Mrs. Burns lingering in the driveway to chat. Maybe we would find joy in that little house. Maybe we could practice hospitality in that tiny kitchen, find beauty through the front door.

Jesus, Door, can we enter through you into our house every time we enter; can we dwell in you? Jesus, Peace, will you always be waiting when we arrive?

I have had to hold loosely to my assumptions, and lay on the altar my grand dreams. Doing so, I can breathe a little easier. I feel the stirrings of hope. And better than all the homes I could ever construct on a Colorado mountaintop, a Home waits for me, shining on a hill. I'll try to wait.

In the meantime, I pray with A.W. Tozer.

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The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. Many ordinary treasures may be denied him, or if he is allowed to have them, the enjoyment of them will be so tempered that they will never be necessary to his happiness. Or if he must see them go, one after one, he will scarcely feel a sense of loss, for having the Source of all things he has in One all satisfaction, all pleasure, all delight. Whatever he may lose he has actually lost nothing, for he now has it all in One, and he has it purely, legitimately and forever.

‘O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need for further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, so that I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, “Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away.” Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long.’⁴

4. A.W. Tozer, *Pursuit of God*. (Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1993), 19-20.

