

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
A NAME IN THE NIGHT

Texts on Sunday, August 7, 2011

Genesis 32 (selections); John 3: 1-8

Jacob is forty. He has become rich in family and possessions. But it is time for what wisdom traditions call the *inward arc of return*. The outward arc of adulthood explored and exploited the powers of personality. We creatively worked our will in the world through love and labor, in family and community. But comes the call to fulfill the inward arc of return, to cross the river home. In Homer's *Odyssey*, too, the hero heads home at forty. Perhaps one reason Jesus transfixes our regard is that he headed home at thirty.

Jacob is terrified. Although his God has promised him good absolute, in the moment of really turning from his double-dealing past to face his future, he is afraid. So much of religion works the same. The prayer formulas, the rituals, the comforting music sound in the ear again and again, justifying life's order and disorder. But then, a crisis!—and many who are, in this outward sense, religious cannot lay hold of anything real in their faith. Indeed, they have no *faith*. Their behaviors disintegrate in complaint and cruelties. “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” wrote Thoreau almost 200 years ago. Today, that mass is more massive. Yet always, in facing what grieves us, there are only two possibilities: misery, or spiritual growth. It is a law of our nature. The call to the inward arc does not yield. Jacob must go now. Yet he *cannot* go—cannot grow, cannot become Israel— except he meet the enemy within. That is how the arc of return begins.

Jacob prays a simple prayer. “Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother for I am afraid of him.” In other words: *Take this cup from me; not thy will, but mine. Keep me as I am*. It is a childish prayer, like so many we make. It supposes God high above, watching out for me, the beloved child, careless whether I grow up. But at the point of the inward arc of return, no heavenly voice answers the childish plea. Jacob hears nothing.

In the night Jacob got up and took all his family and crossed the ford of the Jabbok, along with everything he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the rising of the dawn. In the beginning of the inward arc of return, God responds not from above, but in person—in your own person, in a struggle in the night. The struggle is a mystery. You cannot set it up. You cannot force the fight to make yourself grow. It is strange grace to be given such a night and such a fight and such sight as comes with the rising of the dawn. The gift is offered far more often than it is accepted. It can come through the veil of any crisis—at work, in health, in jail, through

addictions that crash the daily routine or an unwanted death or a terrible breakdown of leadership in a community or a nation.

When a struggle of this kind is given—whether to an individual, or to a church or to a nation—the issue is always a new identity, a way not like the old way—a name in the night. If we do not accept the fight that is given, we cannot proceed. No new history will issue from a nation unwilling to struggle for its true life. No truth and no generations will come from a church which refuses the fight. And for an individual who turns from the decision, only misery waits; maturity, never, no matter the years that pass.

When I arranged this series of sermons some months ago, I thought this reflection on the great struggle for a new identity would connect the theme from the personal to the communal reality here at The Riverside Church. But the jagged rift in our nation on display these last weeks, draped in a weak truce this past Monday and a precipitous drop in the full faith and credit of our markets has re-focused my eye. The possibility of a struggle in the night for a new identity is coming again to our people. It is a spiritual struggle for the soul of the nation. Will we accept the strange gift? Will we engage it—as individuals whose faith makes a claim on us, as a church before God, as a people who once again need a leader to declare “that we here highly resolve that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.”

America, like Jacob, is terrified to meet the brothers and sisters whom it cheated of all that was dear to them. Our current distress is the psychic and spiritual accumulation of generations of denial, of refusing the terms of struggle for our identity. We have denied the Native Americans reduced in genocide. We have denied the African slaves and their children’s children, from generation to generation ignored. Where indeed is a serious dialogue about reparations for evils so long sustained? We have denied the gory wars against small nations, wherein our powers only defended domination itself, while twisting terror into the fabric of our daily life in the name of war on terror. The policy of mass incarceration of black men and women—denied. With breathtaking predictability, brute force—economic, military, and state—has concentrated wealth and power in ever fewer hands, stealing honest wages from the multitudes. And with equal predictability—read the Bible!—brute force will at last crash the whole enterprise of the nation in sorrowful ruin, unless the wise and the spiritual accept the struggle from which a new name in the night may bless us.

Let us understand something about a new identity in the spiritual sense. It is the opposite of denial: it is a new decision about how to interpret the past. A new identity involves an honesty that faces all its evil and its won-

drous good. A new identity is free with apology and amendment of practice, because it *is* free; that is, it is no longer in terror that past evils will haunt and destroy the future, because a people with a new name are no longer attached to one necessary outcome, to one necessary future, failing which they will despair. No, a new name in the night, conferred spiritually, is open to the future; able to partner with the divine light; detached from the fruits of action, thus able to act morally, faithfully, courageously in the present. Jacob had been a dealer, a calculator of outcomes, the least free being. Now Jacob is called Israel—"who strives with God" face to face—for calculation and self-preservation are falling away like shattered shackles. The whole people Israel told this story about themselves, first and foremost to remind them whence they came and where they must go—to meet a brother in peace.

Nothing could be more dangerous or devoid of truth, then, than to demand that religion abstain from politics. To the contrary, when the religious abandon their duty to serve the nation through the value-shaping, identity-claiming practices of politics, politics shows up as nothing but human power piled on power, differing from the law of the jungle in nothing but degree of destruction. But here is true religion: the wisdom to see that in the heat of passion and insult, individuals tend to bring more heat and violence to all their conflicts, inner or outer—unless they are tutored by their a struggle in the night to begin the inward arc of return. Jacob's path, Jesus' path is the path of non-violence. It is an inward practice first, the spiritual fruit of coming to peace in oneself first, before seeking the means to guide others away from paths of violence and greed.

From Jesus, take the lesson of a new name in the night. "You must be born anew," he says. For hundreds of years, Christians have cheated themselves with the unbiblical idea that baptism confers this new birth upon us. That is a delusion. The bible has it the other way around: when God reveals God's Spiritual Presence in a person, then she is to be baptized; then he understands that what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is spirit. Then is she free at last, able to thank God Almighty: free at last. For the deepest, truest freedom is revealed in this, that in the power of God, you find yourself free *not* to do what you have power or inclination to do.

In our Lord at the table, in our Lord at the Cross, we see just this freedom—who was free *not* to do what he had both power and natural inclination to do; in a word, he was free to die. Unattached to the fruit of his action—what he might hope to accomplish—Jesus' work was brought by God to a fullness unlike any other. Now, it is people who are likewise free to die who can and must help this nation from its terrible crisis. This is the

truth in eternal life: so trusting in God, so free of calculation and worry, that every deed and every thought is able to cooperate with the divine will.

God seeks to give that freedom and that life to every human being by means of a new birth, a new name—but the blessing comes only after a struggle in the night like Jacob's, like Jesus'. As we have said several times, these are the terms by which The Riverside Church will make sense of its hard times past and come to itself in the 21st century. No part of our life together will remain as it was, but neither will any part of our story be denied or forgotten.

This morning, however, let us climb high into the spiritual tower of The Riverside Church to look out over a nation deep in confusion and dismay. Some large part of our people are terrified of the color of change coming across the nation. White with fear, this part of us is calculating night and day how to save their life, how to guard the old ways; how to keep their wealth, how to bar foreigners from the door and keep strangers from their face; how to keep the wars going, how to keep the wells drilling, how to keep fracturing the people and the ground on which they stand. It is a tragic scene. It will end either in more violence—or in a blessing, with a new name in the night. The fate is not cast. More than ever, I am persuaded that the remnant of the Christian church who understand the depth and meaning of the struggle for justice, materially and spiritually, must accept this fight. Detached from the fruits of their action, having learned the secret of being well-fed or of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need, some Christian communities have now the wisdom, the practices, the means, and the story to risk famine, peril, and sword to begin gathering a lost and desperate people for “a new birth of freedom,” to gain a new name in the night.

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