

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
THIS ROUGH PASSAGE

Texts on Sunday, July 24, 2011

Genesis 29—31(selections); James 1:2-8

When I was fourteen, at a church camp, I had a powerful spiritual experience. I became an atheist. It was a serious matter for me, and it lasted six years. In the year that I turned twenty, I had another. I was writing a manifesto against religion for a college course called The Psychology of Religion. I thought I had my hands on the basic themes that would explain away all religion. But I had been dared by a friend that spring to study Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* in a graduate seminar. Every week, my readings and those discussions caused me to go back and scratch out whole pages in attempt to salvage my manifesto. My theory of atheism was inadequate to the intellectual light and the spiritual depth of Paul Tillich.

On a certain morning in April, lilac fragrance wafting through the window where I was working, the whole thing fell apart. I suddenly sensed that the object of my analysis—months of work on what I called “world religion”—was not at all what I had thought, but really only my own self in study: a little ball of needs and hopes, of ignorance and light. I saw that I knew nothing of religion. And also I felt that somehow this little ball of my self was sustained by an infinite presence, in spite of my hubris. I guessed that this presence was like that to which people give the name “God.” And I was humbled. My atheism ended then, though my Christian faith did not start then.

Here is why I tell this story. Like twenty-year old Jacob in the story from last Sunday, whose God touched him with the vision of light deep in the wilderness and gave him rest from his labors, my youthful access to the world of spirit did not at all keep me from having a hot, confused, difficult, and costly first adulthood. I don't mean that I became a personality unrecognizably unlike the man you now meet. I do mean that if my first adulthood was a car, when I got the keys, I ran red lights with it, I hit and got hit a lot, I didn't change the oil, I had a couple of trannies, I ran out of gas in rough neighborhoods, I didn't know where I was going . . . You get the idea.

You just heard the idea. In Jacob's dream, God had confirmed in him utmost security and purposiveness, all told in a few sentences. But now, spread over three long chapters, Jacob is jaded, jumping and jiving, striving, surviving, scheming and dreaming of girls and going home, making money, making babies and double dealing his uncle and his uncle him, and there's never any rest. In parts we leapt over today for the sake of time, Rachel and Leah wade hip deep into this mess, all elbows and aggression, jealous of each other, full of sex and subterfuge. Go home and read it all. You'll come away breathless. Jacob earns his name! It means “he supplants.” He schemes. He cheats. He lies. He flees.

He and his Uncle Laban share the “olden rule:” *Do unto others before they do unto you*. Where is that memorable moment of inward stillness and confidence up under a ladder to the stars? In answer, I have only to think of myself in first adulthood; of any adult, really. For man or for woman—our patterns differ—first adulthood is a fever unforeseen by any distress of youth, lasting many years.

Genesis’ strangely long stretch of stories sends us a peculiar task this morning, to feel after a spiritual meaning for an unspiritual life. Why, in these 3,000 words, the name of God appears not twenty times, and mostly only as a boast that God is on my side, making me rich, giving me babies, protecting me from my enemy—but God Godself does not appear. So let us ask about an unspiritual life. What is it?

What is spiritual? That word carries a lot of freight today. So many say, *I am spiritual but not religious*. I think this at least is common to all that is intended by the word “spiritual”: that a person feels sometimes conscious of her being in the presence of a good reality extended infinitely beyond herself. If that is spiritual, then we know “unspiritual.” It refers to life when we are usually only aware of what seems *not* beyond ourself; that is, aware of what we possess and what we want to possess: our skills, our drives, our things, our ambitions, our fears. Perhaps Jacob in his first adulthood was a kind father and an attentive lover and husband (albeit for four women) but withal, he was an unspiritual man for twenty years. This is the story. What can be the spiritual purpose of giving three chapters to the unspiritual man?

Let us think of it as a kind of blessing and a kind of warning. The blessing is this, that the confusion and torment and the erotic, creative drive of first adulthood have been observed by our spiritual ancestors without judgment. Therefore, maybe by your grandparents, too, if not by your parents. The spiritual ancestors have seen it all. They remember; they drove this car once. And their acceptance arises in this additional insight: We wouldn’t be here, not one of us, except for this rough passage through first adulthood, when we wrestled bread from the sweat of our face and babies from our bodies and argued and tossed for love and money like Jacob and Rachel, like Leah and Laban. If it weren’t for the hungers and drives of the unspiritual life, we would not have made it. It was in nature’s way, which cares not a whit for love or wisdom more than are necessary to get the next children born.

This is part of Israel’s blessing upon the way of all the earth. Jews, now as then, live in this blessing more than Christians do, generally told. But Christians were wise enough to name these stories as their Bible too, even if it should take a thousand years or two to learn from them. Here in these long tales from chapters 29 to 31, that question drawn like a sword at the neck of the tribe since chapter 12 is now sheathed. *We are old and famished and few, hating our kin and beset by foes—will we make it?* Yes! resounds the answer. By the force of life, we became as many as the stars of heaven.

But there is a warning in the story, too. Laban's parting kiss on the small faces of his grandchildren is by no means the story's end. Where it is going we will not get to today, but where it is going proves that the tales are offered in warning. It is this. The unspiritual life is a deep, long sleep, a kind of waking unconsciousness. The Qu'ran puts the warning this way: "Do you think that you shall enter the Garden of bliss without such trials as came to those who passed away before you?" (Surah 2:214) And the letter of James puts the warning this way: "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. So let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." Therefore, hear ye! all who seek safe passage from birth to death for all in their care. The sober word in these stories is hard to hear when you are in the unspiritual life, hard to watch when you are not. Presently, you must wake from the unspiritual life, lest your life be swallowed in misery.

Signs of the deep sleep of unconscious adulthood appear everywhere. Its major chord is that one-dimensional self-certainty so often seen among a certain kind of public figure. Carl Jung wrote of it in these terms:

The nearer we approach to the middle of life, the better we have succeeded in entrenching ourselves in our personal standpoints and social positions, the more it appears as if we had discovered the right course and the right principles of behavior. We wholly overlooked the essential fact that the achievements which society rewards us with are won at the cost of a diminished personality. (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, 104)

Life seems deadly serious, humorless. Getting your goal matters more than anything, for it seems no happiness is possible without it. Wanted: my way, dead or alive. Bring 'em on. You go to war knowing nothing, you send men to torture knowing nothing. You Glengarry Ross like Jacob. You drive the world economy into a swamp with games of chance that ramp your ego. You let media, those weapons of mass distraction, have your whole gaze. Your every action causes others' reactions, at which you stop in shock, the world's first victim, and work out your plan to get back what you lost, telling yourself you know how to drive this car. This is the first adulthood. Carl Jung expected to see its manifestations well into our forties, and even beyond for those whose anxieties keep them deeply unconscious of their true Self.

It is peculiar to look back. In a little book about emerging from misery, James Hollis writes, "Reviewing one's life from the vantage point of the second half requires understanding and forgiveness of the inevitable crime of unconsciousness." It was a time when we did not realize there was a trade to be made, a spiritual law at work as strong as the law of gravity: You can either be in the right, or in relationship. As one is strong, the other is weak. You must choose. The unspiritual man has no question, which matters; he must be right. Neither has the spiritually-minded any question; they choose the relationship first. A good friend in Buffalo who had been in prison for many years said it this

way: *All crime is caused by pain not dealt with.* In this sense, Jacob was a criminal. I was a criminal in this sense, as is every adult, until an inward process—a psychic and spiritual force requiring authenticity—wakes him and her from the long sleep. And even when we wake, the warning of Genesis stays ever with us, for never again do we think of ourselves at the top of judgment. We know there is no born-again-once-for-all. We know that every round goes higher, higher. If I stumble, will you help me? This is the way of the Cross. It is the reason that Christians have always seen Jacob’s ladder as a symbol and a type of the Cross.

It is a rough passage. What has it do with the church, this church? Every church has a life cycle. Many pass away; they fail to be reborn in their time. However that may be, a spiritually healthy community seeks and intends a Genesis balance among the generations, embracing that divine gift of drive and will which the body needs, as well as the wisdom of those who have waked from the long sleep, and know that they do not need to have their own way. This is a power not like the world’s power, when those who are being freed from their own will do guide and grace the governance of a spiritual community. Yet many churches miss this Genesis balance.

A church that will wake to a new possibility embraces this way of the cross. A Genesis balance accepts the whole people and is able to share power with young adults. This is an edge of discovery for The Riverside Church—and a fundamental teaching of the Genesis sagas. I leave you with this poem by Portia Nelson:

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Chapter 1

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.
Amen.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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in the City of New York*