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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible IV. Wrestling on the Road

Genesis 32:22-31 The Message During the night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He got them safely across the brook along with all his possessions. But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint. The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak." Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me." The man said, "What's your name?" He answered, "Jacob." The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through." Jacob asked, "And what's your name?" The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him. Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!" The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.

All of us likely have places in our lives that remind us that we've been there before. Maybe it's a place you and your family have stopped over the years on vacations, or a special place that you and a loved one return to now and again through the years. Such places cause us to think about who we were the last time we came 'round that way and who we are now, to reflect on where life has taken us, and how we've changed – or not changed – in the intervening years. And those re-visited places offer us a choice: to either make the same sorts of decisions, to be the same person, to take the same road this time that we did last time – or to go a different direction, to make different choices. The late, great ballplayer Yogi Berra, who was the undisputed king of the unintentionally funny saying, once said "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Well, yes. But on those occasions when we find ourselves back at a spot we have been before, back at a fork in the road where we took one path rather than another, we again have the opportunity to ask whether it remains the best one now – or whether we should go in a new direction, with new choices, seeking to be a new kind of person.

That's where we find Jacob today. He's on his way home preparing to meet his brother, Esau. Last week's "road trip" found him fleeing for his life, camped out under the stars, as he fled his brother's rage at the way Jacob had defrauded him and tricked his father. But now it's twenty years later, twenty long years spent at his uncle Laban's farm where he had fled, and it's time to go home. But the way in which he had left home two decades earlier did not make this journey to return easy. Alone there on the banks of the River Jabbok, not very far from the place he had camped out twenty years earlier, no doubt remembering his deceit and trickery, Jacob had good reason to be anxious about what kind of reception he would receive.

In those intervening twenty years, of course, much had happened. Jacob worked for his uncle for seven long years in order to marry Laban's daughter Rachel, the woman whom he fell deeply in love with. And on his wedding night, his uncle tricks him by actually marrying him to her sister Leah instead – a trick Jacob discovered the following morning and to which he responds with a word that can't be said from the pulpit but for which the King James version uses the euphemism "Behold!" He then has to work seven more years before his uncle will let him also marry Rachel, after which he becomes wealthy and he and his wives have numerous children. But Jacob finally decides he has to go back home. And, you know what? His enforced exile has helped him to begin to grow up, to grow beyond who he had been. He had begun to have the wisdom and the maturity that often come to people as they realize that more of their lives are behind them than ahead of them and that they want to come to terms with their past, to make amends to those they've hurt, to admit the wrongs they have done and seek forgiveness.

Sitting all alone there that night, Jacob talks to God. But do you remember what Jacob had said to God the last time he had been at this spot, twenty years earlier when he had been fleeing Esau's wrath, the story I told you last week? God had told Jacob

then that despite what a scoundrel he had been, God intended to continue to bless him, to make him a blessing, to refuse to give up on him. And Jacob's cocky response to that mighty act of un-deserved grace is to offer to bargain with God. His chutzpah, as the wonderful Yiddish word has it, is amazing here, as he continues to connive.

But not this time. This time Jacob is different. He's aged. He's matured. He's learned that he can't trick his way out of everything. And he now yearns to be a different kind of person. And what he says to God on **this** occasion, on **this** night when he is once again camped all alone is oh-so-different than the cocky, confident, conniving Jacob of two decades earlier. It's not in our scripture for today, but it's immediately adjacent and this is what Jacob says to God, there all alone that night:

Oh God ... I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness that you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this [river before], but now I have become two great companies. Save me, I pray... for I am afraid...."

What a huge change in attitude. No cockiness or conniving. And then comes the story that is the centerpiece of this morning's scripture. All night long, we are told, Jacob wrestles and struggles with a man, who is clearly understood to be a manifestation of God. All night long they wrestle.

For you see, what Jacob was really doing that night was wrestling about the very meaning of his life and about the kind of person he wanted to be and about the kind of legacy he still had a chance to leave. Rev. Roberta Hesthenes says this about Jacob's struggle there on the Jabbok:

What is it that Jacob wanted more than anything else in life? [To] know... that [his] life has purpose and significance.... What Jacob wants more than anything is [that] blessing. But the way in which [he] has sought to get the blessing all through his life... has led to brokenness.... He has tried to get the blessing by

cheating and by guile and it has only turned to ashes....¹

Jacob struggles all night, struggles for his very soul, struggles for a life that is one he can be proud of, struggles to discover the kind of person he truly wants to be, struggles to move past all of that which has so harmed those around him.

The key verse in our scripture this morning is near the end when God asks him what his name is. Now this seems curious, for surely God *knows* his name. But what God is **really** asking is for Jacob to decide who he wants to be, what his legacy will be. For you see, the last time somebody asked Jacob his name, it was his blind father Isaac – and Jacob had pretended to be his brother Esau in order to steal Esau’s birthright. And God remembers. But *now* **God** is asking Jacob: what name **DO** you want to be known by **now**? What name will the future use to sum up your life? What legacy do you want to leave? And this time Jacob replies, *“My name is Jacob.”* You need to know that in Hebrew, the name “Jacob” literally means “trickster.” So, in other words, Jacob is here finally admitting that he has indeed been a cheater and that so much of his life has been built on the pain of others. And so with an honesty that was alien to him earlier in his life, he says to God: “Yes, I am Jacob, the deceiver – *but I don’t want to be anymore, I long to be something else.*”

The Good News this morning is that God always wants to satisfy that longing for something else, something more. God wrestles with Jacob and God offers to wrestle with you and me. God wants to fill that longing. God wants to break through whatever holds us back. God wants us to know that our pasts need not trap us forever. God wants us to live our lives with a purpose that is beyond ourselves. And this is how God responded to Jacob’s plea as the NRSV translates it: *“From now on no more will your name be Jacob, the deceiver, but your name will be ‘Israel’ – which means ‘the one*

¹http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hestenes_3910.htm I am very indebted to her for many of the ideas and some of the phrases in this sermon.

who struggled with God. By that name you and your descendants will indeed be blessed.”

My friends, I cannot let this morning pass and this scripture pass without reflecting with you on the awful events of this week and the challenge they offer to us as individual Christians and as a nation. For like Jacob, we as a people have found ourselves at this place before. The litany of that place where we stand and have stood before is oh-so-painful: the bodies of four little black girls, dressed in their Sunday finest, pulled from Birmingham’s firebombed 16th St. Baptist Church²; a black man, James Byrd, tied to a pickup truck and dragged to his death in East Texas³; the well-documented fact that African Americans are far more likely to be followed in businesses and stopped for no reason; the massive economic inequality that exists that is directly attributable to the fact that African American citizens’ ancestors were chattel property for three centuries; the laws and practices that kept persons of color out of certain neighborhoods and preyed on them with banking practices which ensured they would too often remain mired in poverty; and now nine precious individuals – our brothers and sisters in Christ – gunned down by a young man who found his life’s meaning not in the gracious love of God for each and all, but in the poisonous swill of hatred that is the continuing legacy of all those previous places that had come before and yet had too little been confronted and dealt with, and with too few decisions made as a nation, as a people, as Christians, to take a different fork in the road. A swill so evilly symbolized by the flag that the killer flaunted which flies yet this day over his state capitol and over the hearts of too many people and which is the banner under which four thousand black men, women, and children – yes, children – were lynched.⁴ And this latest place which

²<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/birmingham-church-bombing>

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_James_Byrd,_Jr.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Lynching_in_the_United_States

is indeed a revisiting of too many earlier places is compounded in its horror by the fact that we have also been at this place before in regards to the utter ease at which damaged and vicious people can get hold of guns by which they can slaughter so much more efficiently than with any other weapon. Our hearts ached at those five-year-old bodies riddled with bullets at Sandy Hook; our hearts ached as ordinary folks lay dead in the carnage of a movie theater in Aurora or a high school in Columbine. Yes, we have found ourselves, like Jacob, again and again at that same place – but we did not take a different fork. This time, thought, my call and challenge to us all is to indeed go from this place in a different direction.

You see, my friends, I believe that there is not one person in this room who intends to be a racist or who believes that demented and sick people ought to have the means of murder easier to obtain than a driver's license. Yet the first step toward taking a different fork in this road, from this place, is to acknowledge that, if we're white, we've benefitted from racism that we don't even know is there. And just as we celebrate and praise and are the beneficiaries of the **good** things that our American ancestors have bequeathed to us, so too the first step in taking a different direction is, like Jacob, to simply acknowledge that there is also an uglier legacy that is just as real. There are more steps after that, but that is the first, that is the first. And if we would never again have to pray for a family, black or white, who has been decimated in a hail of bullets, let us resolve this time, this time, that we will do something to strengthen the courage of our lawmakers to act on the desire of that huge majority of Americans⁵ who want the kind of safety laws that would truly address this public health crisis, this ongoing human tragedy. These places – we've been here before. Like Jacob, though we can choose this time *to go a different way*.

⁵<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/20/charleston-south-carolina-shooting-gun-control-reform-myths>

And so let us return to the story as we conclude, for this morning it asks of you and me: Where are **we** struggling, where are **we** wrestling? What old hurt keeps **us** from being who we could be? What ways of being keep **us** trapped? Or where **should** we be wrestling? Are you one who needs to set up camp by the River Jabbok and invite God to wrestle with **you** and help you change some things and take a different direction from that place, a more fruitful and faithful direction?

Let me close with one final word from the wise Rev. Hesthenes, who says that this story is finally about

...God's encouragement to us. We... know what it is to struggle.... We're fearful, but then finally we realize that God, who knows our name, cares about us and loves us. As we wrestle and as we struggle with our doubts and our fears, we discover that God is good and God is for us, and God gives us a promise of a good future, a promise of hope - a blessing.⁶

That is the good news to Jacob, to you and to me, and to our beloved country – that our God indeed wrestles with us, hoping that we will come out better persons because of that struggle, and God never gives up on us. Never. *Never gives up on us.* Aren't you grateful for that, oh-so grateful?

⁶http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hestenes_3910.htm