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What Is Your Name

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During this Summer each of us have found different ways of amusing ourselves. Someone sent the political cartoon of a Preacher before their congregation each who have different thought balloons: “Be Relevant! Do not be political! Care about me! Inspire me! Cure my Cancer! Do Not be controversial! I am so Bored! Validate me! Care about what I care about! Do my children love me? Listen to me! Challenge me! Make me comfortable! Forgive Me! Is there a God? So what? My pet died. I am lonely. I am afraid. I really like the music! How can I be forgiven? What happens after I die? Will anyone remember me? Why should I forgive? Make me care, I dare you! How can I be loved? What must I do? What does the Bible say? We faced this before, why am I here again? Do I have to be perfect?”

I would like to see a second panel in the cartoon for Summer 2020, where pews are empty and the Preacher is wrestling with God. All of this is in our reading from Genesis!

This part of Genesis reads like the Set-Up of an Old Saturday Afternoon Movie Serial: Father-in-law Laban and his kinsmen have been chasing after and caught up with Jacob’s family. Although each believe in the unknown God, Laban accuses Jacob of stealing Laban’s household gods as well as his grandchildren. They resolve their differences, create a truce and Laban goes home. I have always been intrigued that this “Mizpah” was chosen as the benediction for Presbyterian Women vowing “May the LORD watch between me and Thee while we are absent one from the other”; and that the Jehovah’s Witnesses chose “Watchtower” as the name for the newsletter. The image of a Watchtower of God, a Mizpah watching over us all, is a wonderful comforting image. But there is a shadow of foreboding that the underlying purpose of the heap of stones is as an eternal witness of stones to throw because we know we cannot trust one another, and we could do harm to one another.

Having averted the crisis with Laban, Jacob learns his brother Esau has an army of 400 coming from the opposite direction. Jacob recalls 20 years ago, he cheated his brother out of everything, even their father’s blessing, as well as Esau’s identity as first-born. In 20 years, Jacob has acquired: 2 wives, 2 concubines, 12 children, 220 goats, 220 rams, 50 head of cattle, 30 camels, 30 mules. He sent these to his brother, then sent his children and their mothers, announcing that Jacob was following. All of Jacob’s possessions he sends as if a bribe for his brother’s forgiveness, then his family as if to ask out of pity for them for Esau to forgive Jacob. I love the subtlety of the Bible, because like this we all try to have our problems resolved, before having to confront one another face to face. Jacob was a man of intellect and wits who succeeded at everything in his life by working hard, looking out for himself, trying to get ahead of the other guy. Jacob had not been able to make restitution with his father and mother before they died; would it even be possible for his brother to forgive? BUT what Jacob has not yet learned is you cannot “succeed” at being forgiven, there is no way to outwit or win at forgiveness, forgiveness is not about having been right, or intimidation or bribery... Forgiveness involves Grace.

So, where in Old Westerns: Hoot Gibson, Tom Mix or John Wayne, would talk about one danger coming from this way and another danger from the other way, Jacob remembers, in addition to Laban and Esau, coming down from Heaven there is God. While Jacob may have succeeded against Laban, resolving to not harm one another; and Jacob had contested with Esau and now seeks forgiveness; how can one wrestle with God? It would be like fighting a Monsoon, or holding back a Volcano. But Forgiveness is not only about restitution with my brother or neighbor, but the wrongs I have committed against God. The last time Jacob came this way he had been all alone, when he discovered there is a God. But also, Jacob had made a vow, "if God would so bless Jacob that he could return home, then Jacob would believe and give 1/10th of all he possesses to God." Now is the day of reckoning.

When you wrestle with God, taking faith seriously, God holds a mirror up to who and what you are. This is the conviction of sin, which becomes the call for repentance. I sorrow over what I am, what I have done, and I turn from that. BUT this struggle also opens possibilities never before considered, and with new alternatives a new purpose. Jacob had seen Esau as an adversary, now he imagines Esau could be a brother who like Jacob desperately wanting reconciliation. Part of my own identity is that my mother died in my birth. Every person I have known whose parent died or put them up for adoption has had the same quest of "Yearning to know that other, to be reconciled," in communion even for just a single instant.

During the light of day, we seem able to manage our problems. But the dark of night is described as the Dark Night of the Soul, when we wrestle with problems we cannot dominate, and whether we have acted right or wrong. In Myths, this is a holy time for revelation. At first it is unclear who the stranger is that wrestles with Jacob on the shores of the Jabbok? Maybe Laban came back! Perhaps Esau found Jacob all alone! Adult children take up the cause of family to fight with a parent, so it could be Leah's eldest Ruben. It could also be that Jacob is wrestling with himself, his inner demons. But as the Stranger asks his name, it becomes apparent to Jacob he has been wrestling with God.

It had to be wrestling! The Hebrew language did not have any vowels, so Jacob's name was simply "JKB" meaning HEEL, and "JBK" is the verb "struggle" even more that JKB JBKs on the shore of the Jabbok. HOWEVER, WRESTLING represents a dramatic shift for Jacob. Throughout his life, Jacob had been subtle, sly, passive aggressive, even underhanded. Instead of cunning evasion, by wrestling, Jacob has to fight openly and persistently for what he wants most in life: God's blessing.

This was not Olympic Wrestling or Wide-World of Wrestling's Pretty Boy Floyd versus Hulk Hogan. This is physical, intimate, two street-fighters trying to throw one another, to pin them down by embracing and gluing to the other. This is not choreographed or artistic. Somehow with GOD we imagine the seamless beauty of a Martha Stewart Magazine, with immaculately behaved guests and statue-like children. The God of Genesis is sweaty and real, faced with humans who are not fragile, but flawed and wounded and limping but also blessed. Just so, Jacob refuses to disengage, to let go, radically different from the Jacob who made a conditional vow filled with if/then loop holes.

The character of God and the character of Jacob are revealed in this passage. God refuses to punish Jacob for his conflictual aggression, but challenges and reshapes Jacob into Jacob's own future destiny. Jacob's story is a reminder that there is no one right way we must conform or submit, to believe. God entertains all kinds of characters, even personalities that are unconventional, hostile, irreverent. Also the story refuses to domesticate God, making God fit easily into any mold, whether "Wrathful" or "Genie-like." Jacob came away from the encounter with unlimited blessings, but also permanently marked, wounded by the experience.

Jacob demands a name for the STRANGER, whose name is unknowable, instead God asks Jacob "What is your name?" This is the probing essence of identity, "WHO ARE YOU?" Jacob says "JACOB" he has always been "The HEEL, the cheat, the struggler, striving for all I can get to succeed over everyone else." God responds "You are more than that, you are ISRA-EL, the one who struggles with God." Underneath this story is the life and death struggle of Adult Believer Baptism. Not innocent infants in cherished antique-lace Baptismal Gowns, but a 60 year old, or 80 or 90 year old, isolated in our home this morning wrestling with whether you are ready to face God. What is your Name? A struggle with giving up who you were left to your own devices, and accepting a new identity, a name that represents Christ to the world.

Turning points in our spiritual journey come again and again.

Turning points come as acts of GRACE, not because we seek them. Turning Points are opportunities to face what we have done, what we have been, how we have lived, and being convicted to choose to have a different purpose. There is no right age for this, no time when we have outgrown the opportunity. Turning Points require we seek a different way of life. The Sacrament of Communion is just such a turning point. Like the Mizpah with Laban, this Sacrament is a sacred feast, where we vow to never go beyond this again to hurt one another. Like meeting Esau, this Sacrament requires taking stock of all we have and have become, consciously choosing if I had to lose $\frac{1}{4}$ of everything I would still be have enough. If I lost $\frac{3}{4}$ I would still be blessed. Even if I lost everything, I would still be able to wrestle with God to be heard, to be loved. Like Wrestling with God in the night, this Sacrament is asking forgiveness and identity and purpose from God.

The piece no one has discussed thus far, is this Virus of 2020 will change us, leaving us wounded. We all hope for a vaccine, a miraculous cure that will make us invincible once everyone else tries it. Will we emerge from this DARK NIGHT OF OUR SOULS complaining about one another, finding fault and trying to manipulate, OR will we be transformed and transfigured as those who WRESTLE WITH GOD? Will we emerge from isolation, no longer taking others for granted but yearning to be together, to be real, to be seen, to be known, to be in COMMUNION?