

Jacob's Limp

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob got up at night and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

I envied them in a way – their ease and self-confidence, the way they glided smartly across campus, their new American Tourister briefcases in tow. Moving from class to class, they knew – almost instinctively, it seemed – when to laugh at the professor's remarks. They asked all the right questions; they learned all the right answers. They were clean-cut and well groomed and athletic and earnest and attentive. They smiled most of the time. They socialized effortlessly among themselves, guffawing at inside jokes. More than anything else they exuded an air of confidence and self-assurance.

These were men of God, studying for the ministry at a fundamentalist seminary, and I was supposed to be among them. For as long as I can remember I had been groomed for the ministry, which is to say that my devout parents expected great things of me. My Christmas present following my sixth birthday was a three-foot-high replica of my father's pulpit, and family lore abounds with recollections of me as a six-year-old stemwinding preacher. I sang "Jesus loves me, this I know" in Sunday school, and "The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that's the book for me" and "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam."

I was "saved" at the age of three at the kitchen table in the back of a parsonage overlooking the Minnesota prairie. After breakfast and our family devotions my father asked if I was ready to invite Jesus into my heart. For some reason, I have a vivid mental image of the toaster, its brown fabric-covered cord trailing off the table. Yes, of course I would renounce my sinfulness and ask Jesus into my heart, and from that moment on I was saved. I had been born again.

I grew up in the secure cocoon of fundamentalist faith, society, and dogma. I was a quick study and learned from an early age to detect who was saved and who wasn't. The Lutherans up the road were a bit suspect, what with all their vestments and dead liturgy. Baptists were pretty much okay, though God knows they could get cantankerous at times. Roman Catholics, of course, were beyond the pale. And I don't recall an Episcopal church in the area, though I do remember, as a low-church evangelical, the first time I saw a cleric wearing a purple shirt, I thought it was simply bad taste.

Jacob, the protagonist in today's lesson from the Hebrew Bible, could very well be accused of bad taste. He was a scoundrel, pure and simple. He brazenly stole his older brother Esau's birthright. Jacob, disguised beneath a goatskin, cadged his brother's rightful inheritance while Esau was out fetching supper. Jacob got his comeuppance a bit when, after working seven years for the woman he loved, his devious father-in-law delivered the wrong woman to Jacob's marriage bed. Jacob worked another seven years and finally secured Rachel for his second wife. He succeeded pretty well in the ranching business and then one day, camped out in the hill country, word arrived that Esau and his entourage were about to drop by. Jacob, all alone and sweating bullets, finally beds down by the Jabbok River and, in the

course of a fitful night, grapples with a phantom – a man or an angel, perhaps, or even God – a wrestling match that leaves him with a bum leg.

Our encounter with the Almighty, each of us, comes at different times and in different circumstances. Jacob had a pretty good life, and then word arrived that Esau was about to drop by, and suddenly things didn't seem so settled. For me, my path toward ordination had pretty much been settled since childhood – even, I suspect, from infancy.

There was comfort in that world, I'll not deny it. There's a certain appeal to being cosseted in a subculture with little room for ambiguity, where my destiny, both heavenly and earthly, had already been determined. Yet here I was watching these seminarians armed with their briefcases and their self-assurance. They had stuck with the program. They had solved the riddle of faith, which for them was really no riddle at all. Ask them a question, any question, and they could supply you with an answer. They could recite the various arguments for the existence of God. Belief for them was effortless and easy, and I envied them. Yes, I envied them.

I was twenty-two at the time, a year out of college, and unemployed. After extensive deliberation I had turned down a career as an underwriter for Allstate Insurance Company, and as I looked for gainful employment I knew I was searching for something else: I was searching for the certainty I saw on the scrubbed faces of the seminarians. I knew I hadn't become the sunbeam Jesus apparently wanted. In the language of the evangelical subculture, I was "willful" and "wayward"; I had slipped my moorings and was drifting in doubt and uncertainty.

A kind of intellectual restlessness had overtaken me. I was enamored of the world of ideas, so for a time I thought the way to reclaim the faith lay in rational argumentation, intellectual respectability. I was embarrassed by the simple piety of my parents, so I tried to dress up evangelical convictions in intellectual sophistication. Phrases like "reasoned belief" and the "integration of faith and learning" tripped off my tongue. The theological discipline of apologetics seemed like the right course. If only we

fundamentalists could come up with a reasonable defense of the faith then we could hold our heads high in the marketplace of ideas.

So after a couple of decades steeped in fundamentalism, I trotted off to graduate school and immersed myself further in the life of the mind. Fundamentalism, with its petty squabbles over doctrinal minutiae couldn't have been farther from my consciousness. I was busy building a career of my own, and I couldn't care less about those smug seminarians.

Despite my satisfaction with the life of the mind, however, the life of the Spirit still beckoned, and I count this as a remarkable working of grace. Shortly after settling into my initial academic appointment, I decided, in effect, to revisit my past, although I didn't recognize that I was doing so at the time. I set out on a journey into the evangelical subculture in America with the idea of lending some perspective to the televangelist scandals then titillating the media in the mid-1980s. I visited churches and camp meetings and seminaries and Bible camps. I heard plenty of bad sermons in the course of my travels and more renditions of "Shine, Jesus, Shine" than I care to count, but I also started hearing the gospel. I heard the gospel in the strains of "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" and in the simple expressions of piety of folks with their arms upraised to Jesus. I heard the gospel in an old friend's lament that fundamentalists had taken the gracious, beckoning words of Jesus and twisted them into demands, threats, and moral imperatives.

I don't think I heard much of the gospel during my visit to a fundamentalist Bible camp in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, but there, as the flames of the campfire licked the darkness, my life began to make sense to me. I saw how desperately my parents wanted to rear me in the faith, how they wanted me to have the same conversion to fundamentalist Christianity that had so profoundly shaped their own lives. At the same time, however, as I listened to teenagers around the campfire talk about their own spiritual lives, I saw how difficult it was for me to appropriate my parents' faith. They had socialized me in the church since infancy – Sunday school, sermons, family devotions, Bible camp – and yet they expected that my moment of conversion would have the same transformative power as theirs. That, I concluded, was unrealistic because my "conversion" at age three was, at best,

a ratification of the beliefs and the regimen that had been drilled into me since birth.

I saw myself in the adolescent faces around the campfire that night. I recognized the urge, under the extraordinary pressure of parents and peers, to give my life to Jesus, to conjure the right religious emotions, and then to declare my readiness to live a “good Christian life” and abide by all the fundamentalist strictures. I also recognized myself in those who, choking back tears, were “rededicating” their lives to Jesus, those whose conversions hadn’t generated the emotion or the transformation they thought was expected of them, so they were revisiting the moment, this time “rededicating” their lives to Jesus as the flames danced and the embers glowed.

My experience at the Bible camp prompted me to reconsider my own struggle with faith. With the encouragement of a fellow pilgrim, I discarded my image of the self-confident seminarians and the triumphalist preachers. I even set aside the imposing specter of God the Father, who had been portrayed to me as demanding and authoritarian. I found Jesus a much more sympathetic figure. Jesus, I suspected, wouldn’t have felt very comfortable with the briefcase crowd either. As nearly as I could tell, he hung around with ne’er-do-wells, people on the margins of society – fishermen and tax collectors and adulterers and lepers.

In time, it occurred to me that the entire Bible was populated with scoundrels. Paul certainly fits that description, both before and after his conversion. Peter didn’t score too well on the loyalty test. David could not have become a member of any fundamentalist church that I’m aware of; he was hardly the poster boy for “traditional family values.”

And yet the Bible seems to celebrate these characters. God chooses Paul – irascible old Paul, to be the conduit for spreading the gospel. Jesus surely must have given Peter his nickname, “The Rock,” with his tongue at least partially in cheek, to call attention to the fact that, with his spineless dithering, Peter was anything but solid. David, the Scriptures tell us, was a man after God’s own heart.

Then there’s Jacob, dear Jacob. He heads the list of scoundrels.

Whatever else you care to say about these characters, they strike me as quintessentially human – Jacob and Paul and David and Peter and a hundred others whose images flicker before us in the Bible, however briefly. They are three-dimensional beings with a substance to them that I found lacking in the role models of my fundamentalist past. The religion of my childhood, not to mention the seminarians who so unnerved me, had taken the stories of these wonderfully complex and textured characters and reduced them to morality plays – abject sinners who suddenly are transformed into good, rule-abiding Christians.

Through some unaccountable working of grace, I began to see them not so much as saints but as fellow pilgrims. Like me, they are flawed. They trudge along, step by step, just like most of us mortals. What they share in common, I think, is a sense that the call of God is the call to be human, to embrace our humanity in all of its ambiguity. They see that the call of God is a summons to embark upon a journey of faith whose destiny is not always apparent. The Book of Hebrews tells us that when Abraham, another character with a checkered past, answered the call of God, “he went out, not knowing where he was to go.”¹

For me, the path to faith has been rocky and my steps uneven. I am plagued by doubts and fears and anxieties. I feel desolate, at times, and my cries to God meet with silence. I have been locked in a lovers’ quarrel with my father, the preacher, for the better part of four decades, a quarrel over faith and belief and theology that has not so much abated as it has taken a different form since his passing more than a decade ago. Like Abraham, I’m not always certain where I’m going on this pilgrimage, and my progress is slowed, I’m sure, whenever I pause to wrestle with God – or someone – lurking there in the darkness. My trajectory is rarely straight and not always upward. It resembles at times the woven, brown cord of a toaster trailing off the table. . . .

¹Hebrews 11:8 (RSV).

And yet what sustains me is a sense, or at least the hope, of divine presence, that I am not alone on this pilgrimage, but I am in the company of friends who will pick me up from time to time, dust me off, and point me in the right direction. What sustains me is a suspicion that there is still enchantment in the world – in the air on top of a mountain, in the crunch of leaves beneath a harvest moon, in the dazzling colors on the flanks of a rainbow trout, in the sound of wind brushing past pine needles. What sustains me is the laughter of my sons. What sustains me is the delight of love and companionship and making love. What sustains me is the conviction that the journey brings its own rewards, regardless of the destination, that holiness somehow is imbedded in the process itself.

I believe because of the epiphanies, small and large, that have intersected my path – small, discrete moments of grace when I have sensed a kind of superintending presence outside of myself. I believe because these moments – a kind word, an insight, an anthem on Easter morning, a chill in the spine – are too precious to discard, and I choose not to trivialize them by reducing them to rational explanation. I believe because, for me, the alternative to belief is far too daunting. I believe because, early in the twenty-first century, belief itself is an act of defiance in a society claims to prize rationalism above all else.

I no longer envy the seminarians I knew forty years ago, even though I'm sure those spiritual athletes are far ahead of me on the journey. I congratulate them on their self-confidence. They figured out all of their answers before I even knew the questions, and I will never be able to match their strides.

Perhaps you, too, are a pilgrim, and if you look for me, check somewhere toward the back of the pack. Like Jacob, I'm the guy with a limp.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 31, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut