

A Vision of the Sacred – Brian Hartley

Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

If you look out across the Smoky Mountains on most mornings, you can see a swirl of clouds lingering over the mountain tops and blocking your vision of the land below. It is amazing to watch as the haze begins to clear and expose the verdant valleys bedecked below in their summer splendor. And, if you enter into that dense flora (as we did most mornings during our recent time away) you are reminded of the absolute glory of quiet broken only by the sounds of nature—perhaps a twittering bird or the hum of insects. A thousand years ago this was the sacred land of the Cherokee people—a place they viewed with reverence and awe. And still today, it is one of the few tracts of virgin old-growth forest remaining to remind us of a time not so long ago when it was purported that a squirrel could have swung into a tree on the east coast and not touched the ground until some point west of the Mississippi River. Though it is but a small token of that canopied forest of long ago, if one sits and closes one's eyes while sitting quietly along a gurgling mountain stream there exists the distinct possibility of going back in time to a culture where sacred space was not just a concept but a reality.

In this morning's scripture passages we are beckoned into three different narratives all of which struggle with this idea of **sacred time, place, and people**. For the apostle Paul, it is an inner struggle to understand how God's salvific work made known in Christ breaks through his previously-understood view of what it means to be God's holy people. For Second Temple Judaism, that idea of sacrality was embedded in their own self-identity. To be a Jew was to be a part of the holy narrative. And for those taking part in the Gospel story, that vision of the sacred takes place in the miracle of the breaking of the bread and the blessing of the fish which come to reveal God's sacramental presence made known in the God-man, Jesus, who desires nothing more than to withdraw to a deserted place but is called out to meet the needs of the crowd that has gathered. It is his presence, his participation, his prayer, which takes that which is entirely everyday and ordinary and converts it into something much greater.

But it is in the familiar story of Jacob that all of these elements really begin to coalesce. Jacob, we have learned over the past few weeks, emerged from the womb struggling with his brother, Esau. His very name means "heel-grabber," or "struggler." As Teresa outlined for us last week, he has come most recently from his cushy life lived amongst his uncle Laban where he managed to collect two wives, two servant concubines, and a brood of children. He has come of age now and is a wealthy patriarch in his own right. And yet he cannot get entirely away from the sins of his youth. (As Will Willimon once suggested, Jacob could never be the poster boy for Conservative Christian Family Values!) Today's story puts him at a **sacred crossroads**—a place where he must confront that past and, more specifically, his brother, Esau, from whom he had stolen a birthright. There is much in this story that is lost to us in the translation, particularly the narrator's word play between the protagonist, Jacob, and the place of encounter, Jabbok—two words which in Hebrew sound very much the same. But, at the center of the story

stands Jacob's encounter with the unknown and unnamed man at the river's edge from which he emerges a different person than the one whom we met last week. And it is this struggle which I'd like to focus on this morning.

Scholars have spilled a great deal of ink over the identity of Jacob's antagonist. Some have said it was an angel, other even God in the form of a man. The early church fathers were especially attracted to this story and tended to see in Jacob the prototypical athlete, that is, one who is in training and seeking to overcome vices while acquiring virtue. They oftentimes would spiritualize this passage and see in it a spiritual contest in search of the contemplative life. Most modern-day exegetes concede that behind the story lurks a very ancient folktale of a river spirit whose task was to stop Jacob from crossing the river to meet his destiny. According to this ancient mythological understanding, what was most important is that the opponent's name remained a mystery, which in the ancient world meant that Jacob had no power over him. But, no matter what interpretive stance we take, what we clearly have at work here is a struggle against one's own terrors. At the beginning of the story, in fact, the text clearly states that "Jacob was left alone." And it is in the context of his desolation and nakedness that the struggle itself takes place.

The text is at pains, in fact, to demonstrate Jacob's fear and isolation. Because he remembers that Esau's last words reported to him by their mother, Rebekah, was that he intended to kill him, he has sent word ahead to his brother that he is on his way, that he comes bearing wealth, and that he wants to put the past behind them. But Esau has responded by approaching with a retinue of some 400 men. In his own terror, Jacob has cried out to God praying for divine assistance, and has taken things into his own hands by carving out a significant portion of his wealth and sending it on ahead in an attempt to appease his brother. But he does not yet know how Esau will respond to this peace offering. In fact, he has even sent the members of his family ahead of him, as well, hoping to further protect himself. And now, the heel-grabber has come face-to-face with his own worst fears and finds himself no longer in charge but on the receiving end of life's struggles.

It would be tempting for us to deal harshly with Jacob and call him out for his cowardice on many of these counts, but in many ways Jacob is "everyman"—he is us. One would think that having walked with God for decades and been the recipient of his grace on numerous occasions that Jacob would have come to terms with issues of faith by now—but the narrative suggests otherwise. What is striking here, however, is Jacob's willingness to grapple with his destiny and to not let go. He has not tried to sneak across the river or to forego the challenge before him: this time he has decided to face it forthrightly. And if this place which he is later to give the name, "the face of God," is to become sacred it is not so much because of the contours of the land or because it was some mystic moment when the Spirit of God fell down from the sky but because here Jacob decided to immerse himself in his own greatest doubts and fears.

And, as a result of facing those fears, Jacob comes away different in at least three different ways. First, he is given a new name. Up until this time he had been Jacob, "heel-grabber," but

now he was to be called Israel, the one who strives with God. Second, he receives a blessing—that which he most longed for. Although he had accumulated great wealth, he had been willing to risk it all for an encounter with the living God in the hard and dirty task of wrestling. And, finally, his hip is thrown out of joint. From this day forward he was to be a “marked man”—forever known by a curious walk earned in the trenches at the river Jabbok. That limp signified to others that he had engaged in sacred combat and come away to tell the tale. Now, renamed, blessed, and marked with the scars of battle, he was a changed man.

Early on in my own journey of faith, I began to identify with this story and to make it my own. You see, in the summer of 1971 my father had been appointed to a small church deep in redneck country in eastern Oklahoma and I had left behind the comforts of life in suburban Oklahoma City. And, the fact of the matter was that I did not adjust well. A bookish and somewhat introverted boy thrown into a somewhat clannish culture, I endured not only regular verbal taunts but even occasional physical abuse. My one respite, though, was being able to excel in the classroom and go home and bury my sorrows in some fictional world where justice prevailed. I looked forward especially to English class where we would oftentimes read aloud and discuss the great writers of English literature. And so it was that I entered sophomore English the next year knowing that there were two plays by Shakespeare in the assigned textbook. Imagine my despair, then, when I discovered the first day of class that we would not be reading either “Macbeth” or “Julius Caesar.” When I asked Mrs. Taylor why, she explained to me that most of the children in the class were destined for a life on the farm or in the factory where Shakespeare would have little relevance to their everyday lives. I was crestfallen and begged her to reconsider. It was then that the bargain was struck that would change my experience at that school. For, you see, Mrs. Taylor knew something of the abuse I had endured and thought that going out for a sport would earn me credibility with both the cowboys and the sodbusters. So it was that, despite my skinny awkwardness and severe nearsightedness, I found myself a novice on the Junior Varsity wrestling team.

Unfortunately, throughout most of the season wrestling not only took time away from my precious books, it further contributed to my reputation as a pansy. I struggled to get up to the assigned weight of 128 pounds and, though I drilled ad nauseum on the required moves, I was slow and ungainly on my feet. The results were predictable—I lost match after match. In fact, my usual goal when facing an opponent was to avoid being pinned to the mat—my typical fate. Night after night, match after match, I would screw up my courage and go out to face the assigned foe knowing I had little chance of prevailing. Usually there would be laughter in the background and sometimes even jeers. My team mates hated the fact that my loss made it all the more difficult for them to accumulate enough points for a win. And it proved humiliating—none more so than when I was pinned in less than thirty seconds by my opponent from the Oklahoma School for the Blind. The taunt the next morning was “Hartley four-eyes loses to Okie no-eyes.”

By midwinter, I was used to riding at the back of the bus, typically curled up with a book until the sunlight faded away. We were headed to our last regular match at Tahlequah, home of the Five

Civilized Tribes. This town was at the end of the infamous 19th-century Trail of Tears where the last of the Cherokee tribe had collapsed in exhaustion after the long wintry march from Georgia. Several of my teammates had already been drinking and the jeering Indian war whoops filled our end of the locker room. My record was 0 and 17 and it was my last chance to redeem myself. The details of that night are now lost to me, except for seeing my five-foot-tall squat and muscular opponent across from me with his brother Native Americans arrayed behind him. I knew if he once got on top of me, all would quickly be over. I had to be aggressive, I had to take the offensive and quickly get in control of the match. And that is what I did. The reality was that he was so strong that I had no hope of ever pinning him, but I did receive points for near-falls. I'm sure the adrenaline pumping through my veins that night would have been enough to kill a horse. I was fourteen years old, encrusted with skin blemishes, and the butt of jokes for my team—but I had decided that I simply wasn't going to endure another loss.

On the bus on the way home the guys put an Indian head garb on me and doused me with Jack Daniels. From that point on I earned at least a modicum of respect. Baptized with sacramental liquid, I was admitted at least to the margins of Sallisaw adolescent society and given a new name. I was no longer a complete "loser." Because of that one brief shining moment, I was now to be known as "Chief" and when sighted across campus the guys would break out into a war whoop and begin to dance in circles. Tahlequah High School, at the heart of the proud Cherokee Nation, had become my Jabbok where I had met my fears and come away a different person.

Now, I know that many of you cannot probably identify quite so easily with Jacob—and I am sure most have no desire to engage in a real wrestling match! But in this summer season of Ordinary Time when life drones on in something of a quotidian rhythm, today's story of Jacob suggests that God meets us in the ordinary and mundane interstices of our everyday pilgrimage. We may not have some cataclysmic conversion story to tell—we may not even recognize the moment for what it is. But it is in the midst of our journeys, oftentimes when we, like the patriarch, find ourselves middle-aged or older that we have to confront our doubts and our fears. Perhaps, like Jacob, we have even managed to gather around us a spouse, children, and even grandchildren. Perhaps, like Jacob, we have accumulated some wealth and even notoriety. And, perhaps, like Jacob, none of these have taken away our fear, but only left us face-to-face with our own inadequacies and need of God. In point of fact, perhaps like Jacob we remain encumbered by our own youthful indiscretions.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus takes the very ordinary gifts of bread and fish, blesses, breaks, and distributes them and then something wondrous happens—there is enough for all and to spare. And I think that oftentimes we may be tempted to think that the miracle is in the multiplication. But perhaps the true miracle is in the young lad and the very ordinary gifts that he brought to the table. I doubt that on that particular day as he made his way to hear Jesus, the itinerant preacher, that he had any idea that he would become a means of blessing and that that hot day around the lake would break forth into a sacred moment. Perhaps in years to come the young boy, now become a grown man, would come back to that place and remember how

Jesus had ordered them all to sit on the grass. Those few moments would have been seared into his memory. And yet, it was a day like any other, a place like any other. But it was at that moment and that place that his eyes had been opened and that he, like his ancestor, Jacob, had been written into the sacred story.

You see, the good news is that the story continues to be written and we are each given opportunity to count ourselves in at any ordinary moment to what may yet become a sacred moment in time. At such a place, we are called to walk forward and to face our fears and wrestle with them, to extend what we have to God, even to, as Paul suggests, offer our own life on behalf of others. And in that ordinary moment, now become sacred time, God takes our small offering and turns it, turns us, into something beyond our wildest dreams. And, if we yield ourselves to such moments and to such a God we find ourselves reborn, given a new name, blessed, and forever marked as different. In such a time, we find ourselves counted in on God's story and our name stitched into the larger cloth that includes Jacob, Paul, and the unnamed boy who offered what he had to Jesus. For, it is in such ordinary times that we may yet behold the face of God and encounter the sacred vision. May God give us the strength so to do. Amen.