

Why the Name of God Matters

Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14:13-21

“Then Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him.”

Between his encounter with God at Bethel and his wrestling with a stranger at the Jabbok, Jacob has done well if not good. In fact, according to Frederick Buechner, “far from suffering for his dishonesty early in life, Jacob clearly profited from it....The only price he had to pay was to go away for a while until Esau’s anger cooled down....” Buechner’s conclusion, thus far in Jacob’s story, is that dishonesty is not a bad policy. Not “extreme dishonesty--larceny, blackmail, perjury” mind you, but “Jacob’s kind of dishonesty, which is apt to be your kind and mine....There is no law against taking advantage of somebody else’s stupidity, for instance. The world is full of Esaus, of suckers, and there is no need to worry about giving a sucker an even break because the chances are that he will never know what hit him anyway. Only...(here Buechner pauses)...what does it all get him? I think,” he says, playing us, “it can get him a good deal, this policy of dishonesty where necessary. It can get him the invitation or the promotion. It can get him the job. It can get him the pat on the back and the admiring wink that mean so much. And these, in large measure, are what we mean by happiness.” Jacob has done well if not good thus far.

But now the time has come for Jacob to turn toward home, where Esau presumably lies in wait. He sends his messengers to scout out the situation and learns that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Suddenly this happy, successful man is terrified because he is facing the possibility of death: his death by his brother’s hand or his brother’s death by his hand. All these years of acquisitions and accumulation, all these stories of deceit and trickery, all these decades when the name of God was only mentioned as the cause of his prosperity: none of this avails in when you come face to face with death.

I am old enough now to know how it is when you are blessed in your prime with family and fortune sufficient to more than meet your needs; old enough to know how the God--who made promises to you when you were young and on the run from home, when you were vulnerable, in the dark, in a certain place—how God becomes another acquisition, an appendage to your life, an afterthought when you consider the long way you have come on your own. Oh, you have certainly said table grace and have counted your blessings. Now, however, because the diagnosis is dire or the impending fall great or the future foreclosed by some foreshadowing of your own mortality, even though it feels disingenuous, you take up the conversation called prayer again, the conversation that has languished in the good years.

Jacob prays to the God of his grandfather and his father, the God who had said to him, “Return to your country and your kindred and I will do you good.” He begins with his unworthiness, though it is hard to take him seriously, a man so successful and powerful suddenly turned humble: “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown your servant,” he prays; though true to form he adds, “for only with a staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.” Behold, O Lord, all I have accomplished! More believably, Jacob next tells God what to do: Deliver me, *please* (you have to love the please), from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him.” But ever the dealmaker, this patriarch--who originally responded conditionally to God’s promise saying, “*If* you will be with me and keep me and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear so that I can return home in peace, *then* you shall be my God”—now Jacob reminds God of God’s end of the bargain: “You have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’” Amen. Then just to cover his bases, Jacob sends his sucker of a brother a bribe in the form of *waves* of presents that also are meant to impress and intimidate. Finally, Jacob takes his wives and maids and children and property across the Jabbok—some say for cover, but more I think because something long suppressed in him knows that he must face *this* darkness, like the *last* darkness, alone. Mortals “must be alone,” Elie Wiesel writes of Jacob and of us all, “to listen, to feel and even to fight God, for God engages only those who, paradoxically, are both threatened and protected by solitude.”

Therefore, *Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until break of day*. The Hebrew for man in the sentence is “ish” and has caused an immense amount of ink to be spilt in order to dispel the mystery. Was it Esau himself under the cloak of darkness? Or Esau’s angel? Or Jacob’s better self? Or was it the God who had promised to be with him and keep him and bring him home?

With whom do any of us wrestle alone in the dark? Surely with all of these: with the ones we have wronged

or cheated or lied to, we wrestle--a dialogue imagined that can last all night long in which we try to convince ourselves that, if not in the right, we were justified in our deceit, our bad behavior, our meanness, our lies; or we wrestle with the angels of our adversaries who perhaps disturb our sleep with the offer of mercy we do not deserve; or we wrestle with our better self, the self we keep resolving to be, even as we wake up to the old self we still are as the sun rises on another day with no amendment of our character.

But what if the *ish* with whom Jacob wrestled in the dark were the same *ish* who is with us and keeps us and has promised to bring us home, the *ish* who assumed our human frailty in the heart of the darkness, the *ish* whose name we know?

If we pay attention to what we know of the man Jacob wrestled with until daybreak, we can say three things of the same man with whom we wrestle. First he comes to us in the darkness not to best us, not to prevail against us, but to engage us in such a way that we are restless until we rest in him. In this sense, he is our enemy because he is the one we have wronged, the one we have cheated of the life he has given us to live in him, the one we have lied to in order to get what we wanted from him. He is a sucker of a savior. In another sense, he is the enemy of our satisfied self, our sated self, our superior self, our cynical self, the self that has refused to be engaged with him in the daylight when he has come to us hungry or homeless or sick or as an outcast and alien. Now in the darkness, he has come uninvited, a mystery we cannot grasp, to demand of us our soul. Which is also to say, he is the enemy who is on our side, the side of the human being we do not have a prayer of being without him. Jesus Christ come to us and engages us who are restless until we rest in him.

Second, in the midst of our wrestling with him and our desperate attempts to get ahold of him, he wounds us and changes us. No doubt before this night, if asked, Jacob would have identified himself as a believer in the God of his grandfather and his father; but if pressed, likely he would have offered some vague generalities to identify which God of the many gods this was. Clearly it was the God who blessed him with all of these wives and maids and children and property. "There is no [mortal] who does not have his own god or gods as the object of his highest desire or trust, or as the basis of his deepest loyalty and commitment. There is no one who is not to this extent also a theologian," wrote one of the towering theologians from the last century. Jacobs one and all, I sometimes despair of the theologians that we are, theologians who leave a service of worship or a Bible study or even a day working with Habitat or a week in Calgary as those who are fundamentally unchanged, untouched, our previous loyalties to the god of our worldview momentarily disturbed but fundamentally intact.

But of those who have wrestled with the God Jacob wrestled with that night, Karl Barth says, this God afflicts and irreparably wounds them. He says of himself that he has become, is and remains something unknown, a different person, a stranger, when he is counted worthy to be permitted and required" to wrestle with God. Or as Wiesel put it, "whoever meets [this God] is irrevocably condemned to another kind of solitude....None shall see my face and live as he did before."

But more. Wounded and changed, yet holding onto the stranger for dear life, Jacob pleads to know the stranger's name. Why, the stranger asks, why is it that you ask my name? The name of the Word that became flesh, I daresay, will not be given for another few thousand years and yet there is something in *this* stranger that embodies the God who, in Jesus Christ, is with *us* and keeps *us* and has promised to bring us home too. Even though the stranger does not give the name, Wiesel says "Jacob has just understood a fundamental truth: God is in man, even in suffering, even in misfortune, even in evil...God does not wait for man at the end of the road, the termination of exile; he accompanies [the ones he has wounded] there. More than that: God is the road, God is the exile. God holds both ends of the rope. He is present in every extremity. He is every limit." This is the God whose name we know in Jesus Christ.

Finally, the God who encounters us, who wounds us in the night and changes us, is the God who leaves us in the morning more vulnerable to our brother than we were the night before. Awake and limping from the encounter, Jacob names the place of meeting Peniel, meaning "I have seen God face-to-face and yet my life was preserved." A few hours hence, when Jacob and Esau meet *face-to-face*, Jacob says to his brother, "To see your face of like seeing the face of God." I take this to mean that from now on, those of us who strive with God will see in every opponent "something more terrible than the face of death." We will see the face of God, the face of love: "vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a [person] flees, down all the darkness of her days, until at last she cries out, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me!'"