

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL
Sermon by The Rev. David J Robb
All Souls Unitarian Church New York City
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Text: Genesis 32: 22-32

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the 20th century's most renowned theologians and social ethicists, was once invited to preach the sermon for an ordination service of a former student. He purportedly explained to the congregation: "Most of you will no doubt assume that the most difficult sermon a newly ordained minister will attempt to give is the first one. But I want to correct that assumption. The most difficult sermon will almost always be the second, because most former students will invariably attempt to pack into their first sermon everything he or she has learned over the course of three years of seminary education. By the time they sit down to compose the second sermon they quickly realize they have completely run out of material."

Though Dr. Niebuhr has been a significant mentor and has helped to shape my political and theological ideas for many years, I am going respectfully to take issue with him this morning. I no longer believe the most difficult sermon for a minister is the first one. I do not believe the most difficult sermon is the second one. Today I am convinced the most difficult sermon a minister will ever face is one's final sermon. At the very least, that seems to be the case for me. Today marks the last time I will ever teach or preach as a member of the ministerial staff of this congregation. It may not literally be the last time I ever deliver a sermon, but it certainly feels as if there is something coming to an end here. Just so you can relax a bit, I really do not intend to hold you in thrall with everything I have learned over the course of a long career as an ordained minister spanning some 56 years. But writing this sermon has compelled me to reflect a good deal about what has been a consistent theme through all my various experiences as a teacher and a minister, and my so-called "career."

This theme began to dawn on me when I recalled the story I once heard from a fellow clergyman and civil-rights activist, Will Campbell. Will was a real character. He had grown up on a hard-scrabble farm in rural Mississippi, earned a Bachelor's degree from Wake Forest and Master's degree from the Yale Divinity School before electing to return to the deep south as a Southern Baptist minister with a strong commitment to social justice for both poor white and poor black people alike.

Campbell's first parish was in rural Louisiana, and because he was a novice Baptist preacher, he soon found himself working closely with an older colleague, another Southern Baptist preacher whom he regarded as his principal mentor. The thing he remembered most about this minister was his inventive skill for stringing together a highly innovative tirade of swear words during moments of great frustration. Campbell recalled the time the two of them went duck-hunting together. When a flock of ducks flew over their blind his companion fired off several rounds without success. He missed the entire flock. In his frustration he bellowed a lengthy, imaginative, and creative string of four-letter words.

Campbell's jaw dropped, and when the dust had settled he inquired of his friend, "How in the world did you ever become a Southern Baptist minister?" "How did I become a Baptist minister?" the man shot back in utter disbelief. "How does anyone on earth in their right mind ever become a minister? I was caww-lled goddamn it!"

Well that is precisely what I wanted to share with you today. I definitely did not intend to follow my parents into ordained ministry—far from it. But by virtue of a number of significant experiences along the way and my exposure to a very gifted set of religious interpreters, I found my ideas about God, and the community of faith, and the insights of religious traditions began to expand profoundly. By way of a number of formative experiences I learned first-hand how significant a church could be in the life of a community. It is common for ministers to refer to their vocation as a "calling," as if ministry were a very exclusive club for religious professionals alone. It makes it sound as if it must happen in a very dramatic moment: an angel that suddenly appears on your bedpost, a flash of insight in the midst of a violent upheaval that changes your entire perspective--like what happened to St. Paul on his way to Damascus.

But those kind of dramatic moments are actually quite rare. And what I want to emphasize is that this sense of being called is not the exclusive property of ministers. So many thoughtful and beautiful people I have known over the course of my lifetime, men and women in all walks of life, in a variety of professions and career choices, have testified again and again that they have experienced God most revealingly in this mysterious process that by short-hand we label "a calling." Here is one example, the witness of a remarkable and spiritual individual. It comes from the memoirs of Dag Hammarskjold, the first General Secretary of the United Nations:

I don't know Who —or what—put the question; I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Notice that what Hammarskjold describes as a "call" is not really about a line of work. There is, after all, a world of difference between making a living and making a life. He is referring to the many experiences any one of us might have when we feel ourselves to be addressed, when we have felt led to do something difficult, to leave our secure routine in search of a sense of purpose or meaning. In retrospect, looking back over my life, I cannot think of a single moment when I experienced God urging me to do something that was easy or safe, or to do something that would burnish my resume. In my experience, that is not the way God operates. If I have ever experienced God calling me to do something, it was never to do something I would have done anyway because of my self-interest, never something that was merely convenient. And I would be less than honest if I failed to acknowledge that I did not always answer that call. Like most of us there were times I have to acknowledge that I failed miserably.

Look, I am well aware that as Unitarian Universalists God-talk is always a little awkward and discomfiting. That is actually one of the reasons I feel comfortable here. Nor is our

skepticism without cause. I am not naïve. I am well aware that many of the ugliest catastrophes in history have been conducted by righteous people convinced they were doing the will of God. Like most of you I am nauseated by the religious hucksters and televangelists who constantly sell religion on the basis of what God can do for you. Thankfully, I was at least raised in a tradition that asked not what God can do *for* us, but what God can do *with* us. In all my life I have rarely, if ever, experienced God as an answer, and certainly not THE answer. Most often I have experienced God as the question, as that power to whom I have always and will continue to be accountable for my choices, as the One that only requires us to “do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly” in the path he or she invites us to follow.

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One of the biblical passages I have always found to be most haunting, mysterious, and profound is the story we heard earlier. It is found tucked away in the 32nd chapter of Genesis in the Hebrew bible. It is the story of Jacob and his perplexing all-night confrontation with a “man” whom we come to understand as a messenger of God. It is presented to us as if it were a dramatic moment of life-changing proportions. Over time I have come to understand this narrative as an archetypal account of the experience of being called, of being led to do something that we do not entirely understand but that will require us to change. To some it comes as a once-in-lifetime confrontation. To others, it happens more gradually, and may happen more than once.

Like most of the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, Jacob is not presented as a particularly heroic individual—certainly not in the way Greek mythology portrayed its heroes. The characters in the biblical narrative are usually quite flawed individuals. Jacob, for instance, is presented as quite a scoundrel: cunning, self-serving, and ruthless. He was capable of taking full advantage of his father’s blindness to cheat his twin brother of his rightful inheritance, then fled to a far country to escape his brother’s wrath.

According to the story, Jacob took refuge with his uncle Laban, was betrothed to both of Laban’s daughters, and together with his wives sired twelve sons (how is that for a Father’s Day sermon?). During that time he becomes quite prosperous by virtue of his skills in animal husbandry, and amasses great wealth for both himself and his uncle Laban. Then it happens! At the very height of his success, an angel appears and tells him he has unfinished business, that he must go back home and make amends with his brother. You may have already discerned that in biblical times, when an angel summons you to do something it is quite foolish to treat it as optional. It is not meant to be regarded as a suggestion; it is an urgent requirement.

So Jacob packs up all his family, his herds and all his possessions and sets out to confront his brother after all these years. He clearly does not know what to expect, but fears the worst. So he sends all of his herds as a peace offering, and all of his wives and children as a buffer against his brother’s anger, across the river that marks the boundary with his original homeland, while he himself remains behind on this side of the Jabbock stream. Then unexpectedly and eerily, a very different kind of danger emerges: a stranger appears. Clearly we are to understand this as a messenger from God, notably, an angel. We have generally come to think of angels as mysterious helpmates, but in this case the angel appears as an adversary. All night long Jacob wrestles with this mysterious other, this “angel.”

I do not understand this narrative as a literal account of an historic event. I understand it more profoundly as an archetypal story, emblematic of what it is like for any one of us to have the experience being called to do something that transcends self-interest alone. It a story about what it means to feel that we are being called.

From that perspective I note three special things: First of all, Jacob, the hustler, the con man, the father, the successful business man—all true ways to identify him—Jacob is being confronted. “What is your name?” the angel demands. But it is clear he is after something more significant than his name, address and serial number. “Who are you?” would be closer to the meaning. “Who are you really, Jacob?” In my limited experience that is how we know we are in the presence of God: we are being addressed, we are being forced to wrestle with the question, “Who are you?” It is not our question; it is God’s question, and one that sooner or later we will encounter and must face at times in fear and trembling.

But secondly, the angel does not stop there. He also pronounces, “You shall no longer be called Jacob; you will now be known as Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” Forget any current associations-- positive or negative-- you may have to the present nation of Israel. That has nothing to do with this ancient story. What the angel proclaims is that Jacob has a destiny that will transcend all his current ambitions and small sense of self. In other words, the story is not only about a confrontation; it is about a call. It is about a call to become more than we dared possible to believe we could be or accomplish. Or as W.H. Auden once put it, a call to “adventure art and peace.”

The final detail to note about this story is this: because of this encounter Jacob is transformed but also receives two special reminders. Before departing this encounter, he demands a blessing from the angel, and the angel grants his request. On the other hand, at one point during his struggle the angel has touched the hollow of his thigh leaving him with a dislocated hip. The final glimpse we have of Jacob in this story is a poignant one. There he is, silhouetted against the rising sun over the place he commemorates as Peniel, and limping because of his thigh. I take this to suggest that the encounter with God, the one we choose to enter, will likely provide a blessing, but it will probably be a wounding experience as well. The experience of transformation, of coming to know who you really are in the utmost depths of your soul through such risky encounter, will likely be a scarring event as well.

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How then will we recognize the moment in which we are being called to something we had not expected to do or be? One of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner has described it beautifully in this way:

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than that of society, say, or the superego, or self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do, and (b) that the world most needs

to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

If the biblical tradition has taught me anything it is this: the real religious questions are not the ones we pose. The real religious questions are the ones that are posed to us, the ones that call us to full consciousness of who we are and what it means to be fully human. The real religious questions are God's questions before which each of us must stand, and with which we must wrestle. They are all there in the Book of Genesis: God seeking Adam and Eve in the Garden who are ashamed and seeking to hide, and asks poignantly: "Where are you?" "What have you done?" God does not appear to be angry, just heartbroken. Or God seeking out Cain who has just slain his brother Abel and asking, "Where is your brother?" Or the angel to Jacob after wrestling with him all night: "What is your name?" "Who are you?" These are the real religious questions, the great questions we feel address us from beyond at different moments of our lives.

Nor are these profound questions ones we will ever answer superficially. It is more like the beautiful advice the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a student about the task of creating poetry:

"... I want to beg you as much as you can, dear sir to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves*...Do not now seek the answers, for they cannot be given, because you would not yet be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

I fully expect to live with and into the questions I have no other way of naming except to say they are God's questions, for the rest of my life:

Where are you?
What have you done?
Where is your brother?
Who are you? What is your name?

I invite you join me on that journey.

Amen.