

Finding a Voice

Sermon preached by Rev. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, July 15, 2018

Scripture texts: Genesis 32-33 (selected verses), Mark 5:21-24

For many years in my work at Williams College, the spiritual epicenter of each week came, for me and for a couple dozen students, in a sacred Sunday night meal we ate together and, especially, in something that happened just after dessert. We'd light a few candles, sing a song, and then read a poem and a piece of scripture side by side, and spend a few minutes noticing how the two scraps of text spoke to each other in the deepening twilight. That was all—but it fed us so abundantly.

That's what's going on here in Rensselaerville this summer, with Maya Angelou's provocative, impish, defiant voice knocking on the door of scripture every Sunday, seasoning our thoughts, infusing our prayers, calling us to action in a time when we're having to re-fight battles for basic justice that we might have hoped we'd already made more progress on than it seems we have. Her poem that's loaning its gravitas to your summer reflections is conceived in story—because the search for justice is always a story, always about something that happened—something that needs to be accounted for, though it's not always named. Something that needs to be put right. *Still I Rise* is redolent with story—just like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou's first and perhaps most well-known title, which makes us ask, “oh—why?”—and thereby hangs a tale that, to hear it, will cause us to weep first, and then to keep a hushed silence, and then perhaps eventually to sing.

I want to invite us to hear a story this morning—a familiar biblical story, though I hope you'll hear it in a fresh way—and then perhaps hold it alongside of Maya Angelou's poem by way of serving up some food for thought.

To give the story some context, I need to take you on a quick trip back to Sunday School. I'll do that first, and then read a story from the book of Genesis that's perhaps a bit longer than the bite-sized pieces we usually hear in church.*

Maybe you remember that Jacob and Esau were twins—sons of the patriarch Isaac and grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah, who got the whole family adventure of relationship with God going in the first place. The twins struggled even in their mother Rebekah's womb, so the story goes, causing her tremendous anguish—and though Esau was born first, Jacob emerged hanging on to his brother's heel, which turned out to be a sign of things to come. (The name Jacob actually means heel-grabber in Hebrew.) When they were on the threshold of adulthood, Jacob cornered Esau in a hungry

* In the interests of keeping the details of a long story clear, and keeping the scope of the narrative within the modest constraints imposed by a liturgical setting, I've taken the liberty of editing the biblical text of the story. An ellipsis (...) in the text as it appears in this manuscript, below, indicates where some biblical text has been omitted. All of my training in exegesis and preaching reminds me that this is a very grave liberty indeed, and I earnestly hope that my taking it has not altered the meaning of the text in any way, and has only served to make the story more accessible in a single hearing, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with the full text as it appears in the book of Genesis.

moment, and got him to trade his birthright for a bowl of savory stew. Then, not long afterward, with Rebekah’s help, Jacob tricked their elderly father, Isaac, who by then had lost his sight, into blessing him, Jacob, with the blessing of the firstborn that really by rights belonged to Esau. By the time the brothers were ready to begin their adult lives, things had deteriorated so badly between them, as a result of Jacob’s opportunism and trickery, that Jacob realized he’d better flee for his life—and so he spent the prime years of his adulthood in a kind of exile from his family. And though, far from home, he acquired a household of wives and children (that’s a long story we’ll save for another day), as far as we know Jacob never saw his father and mother again.

So there’s a backstory: Things have happened, and now, in the estrangement of this ancient family (like the more familiar estrangements in the contemporary human family), there are things that need to be accounted for. There is unfinished business. That’s where we pick up the story this morning—with Jacob, now the patriarch of a large family and heading home at last, no longer able to avoid an encounter with his brother whom he hasn’t seen in decades.

32 *Jacob sent messengers...to his brother Esau in...the country of Edom, instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have lived...as an alien...until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks [and servants]; and I have sent to tell my lord, [my brother,] in order that I may find favor in your sight.’”*

[And when] the messengers returned to Jacob, [they said,] ‘We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. ...And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac...I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to [me], for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become [a multitude]. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother—from the hand of Esau—for I am afraid of him...’

So... from what [Jacob] had with him he took a present for his brother Esau...[goats and ewes and rams, camels and cows and bulls and donkeys]. These he delivered into the hand of his servants...[And] he instructed the [lead servant,] ‘When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these [flocks and herds] ahead of you?’ then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to [you,] my lord Esau; and moreover [Jacob] is behind us.’...For [Jacob] thought, ‘I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.’

[So] Jacob was left alone [in the camp]; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then [the man] said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So [the man] said to [Jacob], ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But [the man] said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘I

have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip...

33 *Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So...he himself went on ahead of [his wives and his children], bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.*

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, ‘Who are these with you?’ Jacob said, ‘The children whom God has graciously given your servant.’ ...Esau said, ‘What do you mean by all this company that I met?’ Jacob answered, ‘To find favor with my lord.’ But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’ Jacob said, ‘No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor.’ ...So [Jacob] urged [Esau], and [Esau] [received the gift].

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Jesus said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). These, I think, are some of the most probing words he ever spoke—though we associate them so strongly with Abraham Lincoln as, perhaps, to attribute them, mistakenly, to him. Lincoln borrowed them in the midst of one of this country’s most catastrophic family estrangements¹, because in Lincoln’s time the unfinished business of slavery, the backstory that cried out for an accounting, had wounded pretty much everybody. We know something about that kind of estrangement—with the siblings of the human family today driven into exile from each other by political disagreements or threats of violence or cultural differences or economic tyranny—and I wonder if there is any help with the unfinished business of the polarization of the human family today in the ancient story of these brothers?

The story begins in twilight—with Jacob finally realizing that all roads in his life lead toward an accounting with his brother for the things that happened between them in the past, back in those most vulnerable and formative moments of their youth. The heaviest thing, by far, in Jacob’s luggage now is the accumulated dread of his brother’s righteous anger, which Jacob assumes has been earning interest on deposit all these years. As the shadows deepen into the night before the day that will finally bring them face to face, Jacob gets ready for the meeting as any of us might: by pulling together a rather extravagant present for his brother, which he sends on ahead in the care of a messenger. But the messenger returns with the news that Esau is coming, along with a posse of four hundred—which of course, confirms Jacob’s worst fears. Up to this point he hasn’t been much of a praying man—but now the only prayer available to him comes with beads of sweat: *Please, O please, Can I be anywhere but here?* And, as you do in some prayers, he hears the answer right in the question: *no, only here, only here.* Humility has not been a distinguishing strand of Jacob’s nature, but this moment finally inspires it in him: “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have

¹ Lincoln made the allusion to scripture in a speech to the Illinois Republican Convention on June 16, 1858, which went on to nominate him as their candidate for the U.S. Senate against the Democrat Stephen A. Douglas. The famous series of campaign debates between the candidates ended in Lincoln’s defeat, which many, including his closest advisors, attributed to the “House Divided” speech, which they deemed too radical. But it helped to establish the reputation on which Lincoln ran, successfully, for president of the U.S. two years later.

shown” to me, he prays—“for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become a multitude. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him.”

What I find so deeply wise about this story is its recognition that, by the time Jacob can no longer avoid an encounter with the brother he wronged, the long, unresolved brokenness between them has acquired so much power, has claimed so much space in his inner life, that it becomes for him an exhausting physical struggle. “Jacob was left alone,” says the text—I’ll say!—and then, simply and without explanation, out of the inscrutable darkness, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” In Sunday School we learned to call this the story of “Jacob wrestling with the angel”—but notice that the actual story is far more murky than that: The dark stranger with whom he wrestles through the long night is never identified, and the reason for the strife between them is never named. Jacob hangs on to the very limits of his endurance, because somehow he knows that his integrity is at stake: “I will not let you go until you bless me,” Jacob finally says. He may have used the hunger of his brother to leverage the buyout of his father’s blessing, long ago, but now he himself has the most urgent hunger for blessing that can heal something that’s broken in a much deeper place. The stakes are so high for him, evidently, that his grip on the stranger, the angel, the night-wrestler, *whoever* it is, has the strength of life and death, which is a problem for the stranger who, mysteriously, must get free of Jacob’s grip and be gone before the emerging light of day fully reveals him. Yet even when the stranger wounds him, puts his hip out of joint, still Jacob holds on—so deep is his desperation to be made new. So, just before the sun breaks the horizon, the night-wrestler confers on him a new name: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God.” (That’s the meaning of the Hebrew: no longer “heel-grabber” but “God-struggler.”) And then, as day breaks, as suddenly as it began the struggle subsides, dissolves, evaporates. Jacob takes a limping step or two, to prove to himself that he has lived to see the day that he dreaded—then turns to look back at the skid marks in the sand, perhaps the drops of sweat and blood. It has been a night for facing things: Though he never could make out the face of the stranger, he has faced the thickest part of the fear, faced the shards of the long-shattered relationship, faced the truth about who he is and who he still wants to be. So he gives the place itself a new name: Peniel—*the face of God*. By the light of a new day, limping now from his own wound, he’s as ready as he’ll ever be to *face* his brother.

The question that I hear this story asking us is really a pretty simple one: How long does it take us to find a voice to acknowledge the unfinished business of our sibling estrangements? It took Jacob something like 20 years to get to the day that followed that night of reckoning; how long will it take us to tell the truth of the things that happened in the past, and to assess the ways they’ve wounded us? What blessing can we hope for in the facing of ourselves and each other? And what does that blessing cost us?

And, this Sunday, it’s Maya Angelou’s voice that calls me to that question. She reminds me that things have happened; she says there is unfinished business. Siblings are estranged; the family is broken, and there are long, dark nights of the soul when there is much in the past that needs to be wrestled with, and a life-and-death hunger for restored integrity. She calls me to find my voice by telling me her story: In spite of all those things that happened between us, she says, *still I rise*. I hear her resilience, her resistance, her resurrection, calling me to own my own story, my role, my part of the past—insisting that I find a voice to tell the truth at last of the things that have happened between us. And still *we rise*?... hmmmmm... That’s the way we want to hear it, as an affirmation that we are all in this

together, all part of the same family—and, yes, we have been, and, God help us, we will be again. But I think the only way to the morning of reunion is through the long, hard night of wrestling with the truth of the unfinished business of racism. Until Jacob can see the face of God in the face of the brother whom he wronged, it’s still about Esau—still about how, in spite of everything, *he* will rise—because, where rising is concerned, God’s intention is not that anyone hold anyone else down, for any reason, ever. When a house is divided against itself, no one stands to their full height.

Jesus said, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

We’re still fresh from our annual celebration of national independence and identity—when we congratulate ourselves in believing that we have gifts to offer at the altar of history: the idea of democracy, the conviction that all people are created equal, the sense of high communal purpose that infuses the words, “We the people...” But there is unfinished business among the siblings of this family, isn’t there?—this American family, this human family, this global family. There is no arrival at the place of reconciliation without a long night of wrestling that’s likely to take every ounce of strength we’ve got. There is a lot of truth that needs to be faced. For instance: It was 150 years ago this week—*this week*—that the 14th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified—the amendment that finally addressed the “divided house” of this country that Lincoln lamented, and gave his life to reconcile. America had already lived for *nearly a century*, by that point, with the estrangement of its siblings. How long does it take??? We marked a century and a half this past Monday since we finally found a voice to name the grievous truth of that wound in our ideal of equality among human siblings—but can we yet say that, by the full light of these days of ours, we are reconciled with our siblings—that the unfinished business has finally been finished?

When, by the light of a very new day, Jacob and Esau finally met each other again, there was a lot for them to weep about. By that moment in their respective lives, presumably each of them was limping, as probably we all are too, one way or another, by the time we get to the heart of our adulthood where, if there is to be any blessing to feed the places within us that hunger for it the most, there needs to be truth, honesty, courage, humility. Look at the genius of the way this story ends: this story of Jacob steeling himself to face his brother after all those years carrying all that fear of his anger, then finding himself wrestling for his life through the night with a stranger whose face he cannot see, whose blessing comes with a sense of woundedness when he finally faces who he has been and who he wants to be—when Jacob finally meets Esau, what he notices is his *face*: “truly to see *your face* is like seeing the *face* of God.” After the long night, he should know.

To find a voice for the facing of the truth of estrangement—to find a voice to name the luminous resemblance of the face of our sibling to the face of the God who made us both, the face of the God who gave us to each other—is the only way into the future. We know this. There is urgent unfinished business among the siblings of this human family. All roads lead to that meeting—we can see it coming just as surely as Jacob did that night—and, the way things are going, it seems likely that every one of us will end up limping and humbled on our way to it.

But Jesus promises a new name to those who find their way to the holy altar where sisters and brothers are reconciled at last, and finally rise *together*—where truths are faced, and where faces are seen in all their startling beauty. Blessed are you, he says. Blessed are you.

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