

Night Visions Part Three: Wrestling with God

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This past week with the headlines jerking us around, with news addiction in our bodies, I vowed not to let certain news hungry egos, whether of the president or his minions, have their way with my heart, mind, body, and to try to stay on task as your preacher this week. And so, Jacob has been on my mind all week long, and one of the most enigmatic stories of the Bible, Jacob wrestling through the night. In the midst of studying commentaries, *and* keeping sufficiently abreast of the news, I also turned to an email *from one of you*. The first line grabbed my attention and drew me in. This line: **It is time—indeed, well beyond time—for white Christians to reckon with the racism of our past and the willful amnesia of our present....**

In your writing, a kind of memoir piece, you weave together the thoughts of the writer Robert Jones and your own thoughts. (Incidentally congregation, I will include this entire piece in my written manuscript which will be online in a few weeks.) So, in this memoir piece, you share how you are wrestling, as a 75 year old white man with white privilege and deeply implanted beliefs of white supremacy.

You are not suddenly just woke now, this year. You have been consciously dealing with racism for most of your life, as a young person during the 60s social revolution, and having lived both in New York City and for a couple of years in a country where you were the only white person around; and more recently a member of a progressive Christian congregation that's been working with this for decades. But now, in this George Floyd moment, you are going deeper and harder into the wrestling than you ever have. You write:

I was taught at an early age to be proud of my ancestry, coming from the best stock: English and Northern European. I greatly enjoyed hearing stories about them. My mother's paternal grandfather was born on a tobacco plantation, eldest son of a slave-owning family. A 17 year old engineering student at University of Virginia when the Civil War broke out he went off to assist his uncle a General and an engineer, in building up the defenses of Richmond. After the war he sold what was left of the plantation and established his family in Dallas, Texas. Several of his sons became modestly wealthy bankers and one an oil company vice president. My grandfather was the exception. He moved west, working as a surveyor for the railroads. He also wrote poetry. My mother got her romanticism from him. She cherished the Southern ideal of chivalry, and gave each of her 3 boys a middle name from the First Families of Verigina: Harris, Randolph, Peyton. She passed on this cultural heritage especially to me, her eldest. As a patriarch-to-be I would learn the virtues of a Southern Gentleman, strong and brave, wise and kind, like her own idealized father.

And then at the end of your piece, you circle back around and write again:

My great grandfather, Frederick Harris, sold the land and houses of the former plantation in Virginia, presumably for a fairly modest sum, and migrated to Texas, where he worked as a civil

engineer. Several of his sons became bankers and corporate vice presidents, certainly in part because of the surviving capital from the plantation as well as family connections with other transplanted members of the Virginia aristocracy. My mother's uncles left her some stock which my father further invested, and which thus formed a small part of the inheritance which came down to my brother and me. It represents the profits of slave labor plus interest. I am still wondering what to do about that fact... It has been only recently that I have paid attention to the factors which have prevented black people from accumulating the capital like that which has enable me to become educated and live a comfortable life. It is only recently that I have recognized the cost to black people of racial profiling by the police. Thus in my way I have been complicit in the racist status quo. Surely I still have some responsibility to change it. Educating myself about racism and its effects is just a beginning.

You also write this:

"As trauma therapy has taught us, there can be no healing until the history of harm has been fully understood and acknowledged by all concerned."

Why unearth all of this deep soul turmoil now? And why share it with one another? Because this is what we are about as a church... teaching one another how to live and how to die with our own life stories woven in and through our bible stories.

Now let us turn to our Bible story about this strange night encounter.

Remember, Jacob, a very complex character in the Bible, has stolen the birthright of his older brother, through deceit and with a major assist from their mother Rebecca. (This common cultural institution of "the birthright" of the oldest son inheriting everything, to modern minds, this sounds all wrong and unjust, but it was a given in that time. So we moderns see a sort of double layer of injustice in this story. But in the context, it's an atrocity, what transpires... and then how the narrative shapes our understanding of this grave injustice is also disturbing. The narrative conspires to make Esau seem less than human.. he's a hairy, red headed, beastly ignoramus. When I think of Esau, **that's** the image that sticks, not the image of how he treats his brother in the last scene. Esau is, understandably furious about this deceit and Rebecca tells Jacob to flee far away to her side of the family; And that when Esau's anger had calmed, she will call Jacob home again.

Jacob departs and lives in the distant land for many many years. Still like his mother, he is successful, smart, controlling, manipulative, and prospering.

Here's a question. In all those years living at a distance, does Jacob reflect on what he has done to his brother and on his own character of deceit? Does it eat at him? we wonder.... Maybe he does talk about it with his most trusted servant, one night as they sit by the fire, a servant whom he thinks will not just tell him what he wants to hear. And maybe he goes to his religious leader and confesses what he's done, seeking absolution. Maybe he goes on a men's retreat and shares his truth with many as they all grapple honestly with the culture of toxic masculinity. All those years he's been living with this, mostly adjusting well, it seems, and growing more and more prosperous.

And now after all these years, he is returning home, with all of wives and children, servants, animals, a huge caravan it must be. He sends messengers ahead to his brother Esau. Saying that though he was returning, there was no need for the brothers to meet or intrude on one another's private lives. But the messengers had ridden back at high speeds, crying: "He's coming! Esau is not staying away. He's riding north to meet you with four hundred men!" His brother was coming to kill him!, Jacob feared. He began to divide his livestock and to send it all ahead of himself in great, successive waves. One wave alone consisted of 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, 50 cows, 30 asses, all in the care of several servants whom Jacob commanded to find Esau and say, "This drove of animals belongs to your brother Jacob. He gives them as a present to his Lord Esau",,,,, and a second wave the same size, and a third. An absolute deluge of wealth given to Esau.... Was this a manipulative move or honest reparations? Wiley appeasement or contrite restitution? After stealing his birthright and all the inheritance that came with that. Whatever it was, Jacob was still trying to control the situation. Control had always worked for him.

When all his livestock and his servants had passed on before him, he saw to it that his wives and his children likewise went safely over the Jabbok with his most trusted servants. So then Jacob stood alone on the northern bank of the river. As the night falls.

And He enters a dark night of the soul. Somehow it has to happen in the night, doesn't it? In the darkness. During the day he is the ultimate manager but at night he is vulnerable, things are beyond his control, upsetting his equilibrium. His soul is severely tested. Is it a dream or a nightmare or something different all together but he enters into the deep unresolved that preoccupies his life. He wrestles all night long with the very one with whom he has to come to terms if he is going to go home peaceably. Who is this? Esau?, the devil?, God, his true self? A mystery.... This is a conversion story, the scary kind, when he finally comes into true self knowledge. He can not reconcile with his brother until he contends with God...

When it is morning, he tries to rise from the terrible exertions of the night—then suddenly realized whom he had been struggling with all night, even all his life long. He began to tremble. I have seen God face to face, "Jacob whispers....

As a nation, we are in a collective dark night of the soul. Aren't we? Our soul is being sorely tested. Our equilibrium profoundly upset.

This goes beyond the need for restitution or reparations, the transfer of wealth somehow to both the descendants of slaves and of indigenous peoples of this land. But it goes even deeper than this, to the soul of our nation. We who are white, are wrestling mightily, God is contending with us, finally wrestling away our self-deceit, our control of how we tell the story of our nation and even our control of how we are trying to come to terms with all of it. This is not a daytime, conscious book study or diversity training, as important as these are... this is middle of the night wrestling

This year of 2020 and now into 2021, we are learning with intensity and even alarm what's at stake if we don't do this dark night of the soul work. What's at stake is not only the continuing suffering of people of color, as if that's not enough!!, but also a distortion of our nation's soul that could lead to civil war and increased violence. What happened on Jan 6 is not just about white supremacy, it's surely

more complex than that--- it's about pandemic despair, and about wealth distribution and the loss of decent paying jobs and health care coverage, about distorted news intake, about personal failure and shame in a time of weakening social fabric, loss of caring communities; and about a skillful, manipulative, populist leader.... Yes, it's about more than white supremacy, but surely it is not about less!... And if we, who are white, don't wrestle with our white supremacy demon, at the deepest level of our national soul... well, we shudder to think of our future....

The good news is that the wrestling is happening. In our own lives, we white people, identifying automatic thoughts we are ashamed of, tracing our own lineage, not hating our ancestors but seeing the truth of what we've inherited both psychically and financially. In our cities and states, the intense discussions and decisions around policing and reparations and land acknowledgment.... And it's happening in religious communities, like churches, we are not ignoring the work we've done with progressive leaders of the past like Bud Friend Jones and Wilma Lawrence and Marjorie Otto, but leaving behind now any self-congratulatory residue, we are, and moving into a new future. "Without the call to high adventure, the faith has never flourished..."

Southern churches are doing some of the most remarkable work. Have you heard the story of the the 2 First Baptist Churches of Macon Georgia, one white, one black? (Again, this comes from the email one of you sent me recently) ...

The two First Baptist Churches of Macon shared a long history and yet they functioned as if they were in different worlds. Originally the slaves sat in the back rows of the First Baptist Church building behind their Masters. As the slaves became more numerous, the white church put up a separate church building for them on the opposite corner of the church property. Today a small park separates their two parking lots. The pastors of both churches, inspired by Jimmy Carter's New Baptist Covenant organization, decided to work toward reconciliation.

... Eventually the white church planned a youth excursion to Florida, but the black parents were not signing up their children, puzzling the white congregation. Finding out the reason for this, their pastor gave a sermon which forced a new recognition on them. To the parents of black teenage boys, Florida represented a very dangerous place. It was the state where Trayvon Martin was assassinated for walking through a white neighborhood, and where the perpetrator went free because of Florida's stand-your-ground laws. They were realistically worried that white chaperones would not appreciate that danger and would put their sons in jeopardy. For many members of the white congregation this proved to be a wakeup call. They could never think about Florida with that kind of fear, and they came to realize it was because of their white privilege.

The churches celebrated communion together for the first time, an act of spiritual intimacy which stirred up powerful feelings on both sides: the strangeness of it, whites and blacks serving each other bread and wine and symbolically joining in one body. Soon after that service the congregations heard of the assassination of a Bible class at a historic black church in Charleston, SC, by an avowed advocate of racial civil war. Sermons were preached in the white church, and congregants were now primed to understand the situation on a new level: it was not just an isolated act by a deranged white man, rather it involved each one of them. With their black neighbors they attended an anti-racism rally. Some still didn't get the new way of thinking. They protested their innocence: they could not be held responsible for the deeds of individuals in other times and places. But many of the white congregation

began to see how they were all involved in the same system. They were starting to empathize with their black neighbors.

The white minister described his effort as helping his congregants build up a tolerance for the discomfort of changing the story, we all tell about ourselves in our history. A history professor in the white congregation discovered some church financial records from 1855 recording the sale of two teenage boys for \$950 each, proceeds going to the church building fund and the pastor's salary. When the pastor disclosed this find there was an audible gasp in the congregation. Further digging disclosed that the impressive new sanctuary the white church erected in 1855 was financed from the sale of about 20 slaves owned by wealthy members of the congregation. The pastor's sermon was entitled, "Learning How to Remember." It had been the sale of some of the church's own members that paid for the building; and undoubtedly that had entailed breaking up of many families in the black congregation. The white congregation had to think long and hard about that. Their church had done much good for the community, including building the black church and initially supporting it, but the downside only becomes visible in retrospect. No longer can they look upon themselves as all good --and that is painful, a loss of illusory innocence. This was a turning point in the relations between the churches.

Some white families were unable to endure the discomfort of revising their self- image, and they left. Some who stayed still protest that "These uncomfortable conversations are pointless, since no current church members are responsible for enslaving anyone." But many members in both congregations felt grateful for these new insights due to the pastors' "covenant work."

After four years of trust building, members of the two congregations traveled together to confront the history of racial violence at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. They were anxious about the emotional impact on them as a mixed group. Black people remembered old stories about family members disappearing. A white man with "a proud Confederate history" worried but also hoped, "that I'll feel responsible." During the visit black and white members wept together among columns inscribed with the names of all the South's counties and their lynching victims. They reflected together, as the pastor summed up: "It wasn't about making it OK; It was just about the power of mourning these things together." Such mourning challenges the racial naivete whites have cultivated over centuries.

How does the Jacob story end, we may well wonder. It's a beautiful ending.

The next morning Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. He did not pause or turn away. He continued working toward his brother. He limped. Moreover, he kept bowing to the ground in genuine humility. And when Esau spied Jacob in the distance, he leaped from his donkey and ran as fast as he could to meet him, then fell on his neck and embraced him and kissed him. Jacob wept because of his brother's kindness. Jacob put his hands on Esau's shoulders and smiled. To see your face is like seeing the face of God....

I share this because it speaks of the truth of our religion. This great myth ends not with violence but with reconciliation. This is God's ultimate promise. And we need to hold on to this promise and believe and act accordingly.

But I hesitate to share this, that is, to move too fast to this ending, when the real climax, the heart of this story, is this scene of Jacob wrestling through the night. We cannot have reconciliation without first contending with God, or our deepest self, that is, without this self-knowledge. And it will wound us, we who are white, even as it heals us. Jacob was left with a permanent limp from the struggle. He moved differently after that night, as a wounded human, not as one in control. And there's this. He was given a new name for this new adventure into the unknown future. He is no longer Jacob "He who acts crookedly ". Now he is Israel "he who wrestles with God "

May we who are white, go into the long dark night of the soul and stay as long as we need to. May we who are brown or black, hold our white brothers and sisters in our prayers as they/we wrestle mightily....

I quoted extensively in this sermon from Jeff Richards memoir article. If you'd like a copy of his 8 page piece email me and I will supply you with it.

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