

“Name Calling”
Genesis 32:22-31
Andrew Foster Connors
9th Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2020

We watched the horror movie, “Alien,” while on vacation this week. To understand how I got two teenagers to watch a 1979 classic starring Sigourney Weaver with 1979-quality special effects, you only have to know that the 2018 Marvel Movie, Avengers: Infinity War makes reference to it early in the film. That was my hook. Now, there are some movies from my childhood that I have rewatched and thought to myself, wow that is so much dumber than I remembered. But Alien is not one of them. It’s not because of the graphics. It’s not even really the horror of the multiple ways of suffering at the hands of the Alien. What makes it really scary is Sigourney Weaver navigating the last 20 minutes of horror completely alone. Tiptoeing through one airlock after another, anticipating a jump scare around every corner with only a 1979 space aged flame thrower, a caged house cat, and a really scary soundtrack. When she finally locates the Alien in the final face off, I actually felt some release of the tension. It had me wondering, which is scarier: facing the alien, alone, or anticipating it, alone? Certainly it’s better not to watch the movie alone, which just happens to be number 6 across on the NYT mini crossword puzzle this morning.

Jacob, who coincidentally can also be found on this morning’s crossword, finds himself alone facing a different kind adversary. Definitely not an alien. A “man” according to the Hebrew - someone more similar than different, who he later concludes is God. Jacob finds himself “alone,” a word that we haven’t seen in Genesis since the creation story when, God, seeing the human being God has just created concludes, “it is not good that the human should be alone.”¹ If you know anything about Jacob, it’s not surprising that he’s reached this point. Everything about his life has led him to this point. His decision to steal his brother’s blessing by pretending to be who he’s not. His out-swindling of his Uncle Laban. Jacob has learned to outwit, out-trick, out-swindle every adversary he’s ever faced. And now, sending everything that he’s amassed in all of his cunning over the river, he finds himself alone. Rich, anxious, and alone.

It’s like the great capitalist nightmare right here in the pages of scripture. It reminds me of the story that Jesus told about the rich man who kept hauling in all an abundance of crops. So many crops he amassed that he had to keep building bigger and bigger barns. His wealth grew and grew until one night, Jesus said, “Fool. This

¹ Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2003, p. 455.

very night your life is being demanded of you!" (Luke 12:20) Which is another way of saying, stop and look at where this vicious cycle leads. This cycle of swindling. This cycle of stealing blessings that don't belong to you. This cycle of grasping for more. It leads you back to that primordial garden of pleasure. Pleasure that cannot be enjoyed because it cannot be shared.

That night, Jacob's very life seemed to be demanded of him. And he wrestled. I love the fact that unlike a lot of Hollywood films, Jacob's personality hasn't undergone any unrealistic transformations. This is a guy who has been hungry for blessings since the day he was born. There's not going to be any Hallmark Channel moment when he lifts his eyes to the skies and says, "okay, I see now that life is really about loving and serving other people so I'll cease my restless pursuits, give my money away, apologize to my brother for what I have taken." No sappy moralism from the biblical text. Just a realistic portrayal of so many of us who have been trained in a system that is constantly teaching us that good things come to those who take; that greed is good; that "getting ahead" is what everyone does - it's just part of the game that we practice and teach our children.

Jacob is like a lot of us, especially when it comes to faith. Sure, we worship the God that our parents worshiped, we just know that most blessings actually come from the fruits of our labors, from the interest on *our* investments, from the sweat of our brow. Like Jacob, sure, pray to God when you need something, but don't count on God to provide you with it. From his birth even past this point, Jacob's personality doesn't seem to change. He seeks to secure the blessings that he wants for himself. The one thing that seems to change for Jacob on this night, is his acceptance of himself as he is. When he stole the blessing from his father, his father asked him, "who are you?" "I am Esau," he lied. But on this night, he says to God, "I am Jacob," that name he had been running from. The name that means "heel grabber," "supplanter," not the name that you would want for yourself. "I am Jacob," he says. This is who I am.

There is a real freedom that comes when you learn to accept yourself. Accept the reality of your human condition - flawed, imperfect, less than ideal. Learn to accept the particular peculiarities of your own limitations, the parts of yourself that you likely cannot change with willpower. Most of us are taught to hide those limitations, those part of our character or personality that we haven't managed to change with effort or intention; to conceal them, first from ourselves, then from those we are close to, like Jacob concealing himself for a blessing, as if deception is the only path toward blessing. Despite the claims of our tradition to the contrary, we seem to believe that God rewards the deserving - the pure of heart or purpose - even though there's not a character in the Old Testament that fits that description.

Reading Ibram Kendi's book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* you can see that dynamic at work in our nation as a people.

I'm more than halfway through the 500 page book and I haven't come across a single White person who didn't perpetuate racist ideas at some point during their lifetime - even those who were the leaders of the abolitionists movement. Many Black leaders also advanced racist ideas even as they struggled for their own freedom. Kendi didn't set out to make an ideological argument. He's surveying generation after generation showing the historical realities that continue to unfold before us in our time. And yet the starting place for our national conversations on race have seldom been acceptance of this historical reality of our corporate racism that we must try to overcome together. It's been the opposite - a defensive denial that we've got a problem 400 years in the making. Repeated attempts to conceal the truth of ourselves from ourselves to prove that we are somehow a nation that is purer in heart or purpose than our actual actions demonstrate.

We are not adept at naming the truth of ourselves. We're better at calling others names we think they deserve. The name calling that has become so much a part of our time. So a young, female member of Congress is called a bitch by an older, male member of Congress who doesn't like the way she votes, recalling that word that has been used by men to dismiss women out of hand or worse, threaten or legitimize violence.² Or a racial epithet is used to invoke the threat of violence that has always reinforced white supremacy. Or the word "r-e-t-a-r-d" is used against a person with an intellectual disability - a word that is similar to the n-word in its historical use to belittle, oppress, and subjugate people with disabilities.³ We are so much better at name-calling others - calling them by names they do not deserve, while refusing to accept the difficult-to-accept truth about ourselves.

On this night, Jacob accepts who he is - the heel grabber, the supplanter, the one whose hunger for blessing never abates. And that very night he gets the first honest blessing of his lifetime. The first real blessing that he hasn't swindled for himself. A blessing that's given to him when he's alone with God. Like most blessings, this one doesn't come to him without significant cost. His hip is put out of joint. He won't walk away from this one unchanged. This blessing is going to hurt. But he walks away with a different name - Israel. Like many things in the Old Testament, the new name is not without ambiguity. It could be "champion of God" - one who competes with or on behalf of God. Or it could mean one who strives with or struggles with God. Or it could mean one who prevails against God. Or it could mean God strives or God prevails.

I love that ambiguity. The nature of the relationship between God and Israel - both the person of Israel and the people who he comes to represent leaves immense room for definition. It could be marked by tragic opposition, or triumphant struggle; by

² <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/republican-ted-yoho-calls-aoc-bitch>

³ Because the word "retarded" is so offensive, I chose to spell out the word in the sermon.

human representation of what is truly holy, or by bitter opposition to God's just ways; by human defeat of God's wishes for us, or a final affirmation that God's will, finally, have God's way with us. The story itself remains to be written. What has changed for Jacob from the beginning of this story is he is no longer alone. No longer by himself struggling against every enemy. No longer tiptoeing through one door after another, anticipating a jump scare around every corner with a really scary soundtrack accompanying his every move. God has entered even into his very name, the assurance that whichever paths he chooses, or are chosen for him, God will be there - to support him or struggle against, to help or hinder when it's needed. The God whose costly blessings sometimes leave a mark.

That's our story, too. We who are marked with the wounding sign of the cross, that device of torture that we, like people who turn a wounding epithet into a reclaimed sign of survival, have turned into a sign of courageous love. It's the best story I know - that whatever befalls us, or whatever path we choose - wise or foolish - God is firmly attached to our name. Irrevocably part of our story, sometimes striving with us, other times pushing against us, not done with us yet. The God who is best able to bless us when we make the decision to stop pretending to be better than we actually are.

A lot of people in our church struggle with this kind of story because, we say, it anthropomorphizes God too much - it makes God seem more human than what some of us have been taught to think of when we consider God. But I think behind that concern is actually a deeper struggle with the idea that we are not always in control in relationship to God. That central message of our Protestant work ethic culture that has been ingrained in us from the beginning - it's partly why we all struggle so mightily in these pandemic times. Waiting, itself, seems like an affront to our way of life. We expect to be able to master our way out of the pandemic on our own terms in a short amount of time. Waiting for a year to return to our complete autonomy seems almost criminal. So does waiting for a God who we can't summon to bless us on our own terms, our own timeline. And yet, the text suggests, this is the God *who names us and not the other way around*.

We are invited to face God as we are, trusting that God will meet us with what we need to become who we are meant to become. I got to hear a friend of my preach last week and she clued me into an interview with John Lewis. The interviewer was lamenting that so many in our nation haven't ever wanted to fully embrace the legacy of slavery in our nation. To face that reality as it has shaped us and continues to limit all of us from becoming who we are meant to become. And John Lewis told the story about a former Klan member who, with other members of the Klan, had beaten him in Rock Hill, SC. Beaten him bloody. He and his son came to Congressman Lewis' office in Washington. He apologized. He said he was wrong. His son started crying. The father started crying. And John Lewis said, "He came up with his son to hug me. And I

hugged him back.” And the interviewer - Bryan Stephenson - remarked, “ It does seem to me that if we can show people that on the other side of repentance, on the other side of confession, on the other side of acknowledgment, there's something beautiful, like what you experienced with that Klan member, then maybe they'll find their courage to stand up and talk about the wrongfulness of these things.”⁴

Maybe we'll all find the courage to stand up and tell the truth about ourselves, even when it hurts, knowing that the one who comes to meet us is not to be feared. It is the one who comes to bless us, even when it hurts; the one who has the power to meet us as we are and name us anew.

⁴ Bryan Stevenson interviewing Congressman John Lewis, The TED Legacy Project, translated by Joseph Geni, reviewed by Camille Martínez, https://www.ted.com/talks/john_lewis_and_bryan_stevenson_the_fight_for_civil_rights_and_freedom/transcript