

Coming home to God...

Coming home to ourselves...

**The Lord sent redemption to his people.
He has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.**

(Psalm 111: 9)

During the last two weeks of August and in early September, many people return home from here and there—some with memories of far-off places, others with renewed relationships nearer at hand. We “come home.”

After reading Jacob’s story (The Book of Genesis 32: 9-31), it seems to me that no one comes home to God without thinking of “the stuff” of life. No one comes home to one’s self without sorting out the stuffing that fills the furniture of one’s life.

Years earlier, when he was leaving home, Jacob crossed the Jordan River with nothing more than his staff. Now, coming home, he’s wealthy. He has he-goats, she-goats, ewes and rams. He has bulls and cows. In his train, he brings handmaidens with their children and, of course, his two wives, Rachel and Leah, with their offspring.

But Jacob also carries excess baggage—guilt-laden memories. He would give the world to deny it, but he cannot: he knows that he has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright; he knows that he has fooled his blind father, Isaac; and he knows that he has conned his father-in-law, Laban, out of just about everything that could not be nailed down. But to Jacob’s credit, he also knows that the truths he has long evaded must be faced if he is to enjoy a homecoming not only with his brother Esau, but, more importantly, with God.

To straighten things out with God, Jacob must find solitude. That night, alone on the banks of the river, quite unexpectedly, Jacob wrestles his demons as long as it would take to bring them to light, as long as it would take to make them yield him a blessing. Then, having wrestled with God, Jacob is given a new name denoting larger responsibilities: Jacob is renamed “Israel,” a name his descendants will carry for generations.

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If we are to “come home to God,” if we are to “come home to ourselves,” we must face, rather than flee, those memories that will not stay buried. Like Jacob, we cannot be blessed without being wounded. A friend puts it, “No laming, no naming.” No struggle, no homecoming. As we learn from the experiences of Jacob, the People’s Republic of China in the post-Kuomintang days in the late 1970’s, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the formally-declared end of apartheid—rebirth comes through confession, from interrogating one’s own soul.

To begin, Jacob tells us that one must be alone. It makes sense: we think of Jesus in the wilderness and Jesus, alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. All of us, finally, are solitudes. We are born alone, we die alone, and in between we stumble along in the footsteps of lonely prototypes like Abraham, Sarah, Ulysses, and Paul.

Alone, we face the demons. We wrestle with them. But the story doesn't end there.

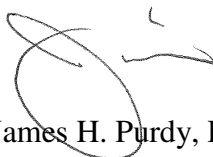
For as in the ancient myths dragons turn out to be princesses, so assailants in the night—those guilt-laden memories—can prove to be angels. God wants us to travel light, all parts reconciled and working together. God doesn't want us to be sinners, God wants us to be forgiven sinners. In a line that recalls Jacob's wrestling with the unknown visitor beside the Jabbok, John Calvin wrote, "God becomes in us stronger than the power by which God opposes us." We can come home, limping like Jacob, so that, like Jacob, we can be at one with God, at one with the serenity that lies on the far side of conflict.

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It's tempting to see God as a pole firmly planted in certain soil, a never-changing, never-moving rock, a resident of a certain mountain or holy place, too distant to be approached and yet comforting in permanence.

This isn't the way Scripture describes God. The wandering people whose stories fill the Old Testament knew God as one who wandered with them; who came to them, sometimes in the night, sometimes at dawn, sometimes at noonday; who "sent redemption to his people;" who found Abraham in a strange land, Jacob camped by a creek, Moses in bondage, David tending sheep, and Mary Magdalene weeping beside an empty tomb. God made covenants with them, went with broken people into exile, and then led them home.

God is not waiting in a holy place or in a frozen Bible. God is coming to us, day and night, speaking words of love and life.



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