
Birth of a Nation

Genesis 32:22-32

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 16, 2016 by
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At one time or another in our lives, most of us have had to encounter the idea as to whether or not we are living an authentic life. One of the defining and determining factors of our existence as human beings, is whether or not we strive to be genuine, to be real, or to be authentic. This notion of being genuine, of being real, of being authentic is one that gets at the core of one's being. It speaks to the essential qualities of who you are and who you choose to be. If someone asks "Who are you?" the authentic answer is the one that comes after the follow-up question of "No, who are you, *really*?"

When I talk to students, those of whom I have a good enough and close relationship with, who struggle with navigating relationships with their peers, they usually have no problem calling someone "fake" if there is any perception of the other person being inauthentic. What I love about the realness of the character judgements that young adults and children make is that it gives me the opportunity to engage them in a moment of self-reflection. I try and shift the conversation back toward themselves and ask them to do a self-inventory of how they may be coming off to the other person; is there something they are doing that could make the other person see them as inauthentic? Not who they say they are?

The nature of being authentic also has to do with one's convictions: what are the intractable and unmovable parts of your being; what are the sustaining streams of influence that make up your conscience. What is it that moves you? What keeps you going? What is it that makes you go on just a little while longer to see what the end gon' be?

It is no secret that the title of today's sermon is borrowed from the biopic of the same name that tells the story of the enslaved American by the name of Nat Turner. The biopic, "The Birth of a Nation" intentionally and ironically not to be confused with the other silent movie of the same name released in 1915, climaxes with the story of the deadliest slave insurrection on United States soil in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. The story of Nat Turner, at best, gets mentioned as a sentence or two in high school history books, maybe a paragraph depending on the publisher. But it rarely if ever goes into the details about the man named Nat Turner. Of course there are dozens of people in a history book that never get the full biographical treatment. But it dawned it me, after watching the movie, and preparing this sermon that with the visceral and inhumane images of slavery that the movie showed, that I was deeply moved by the level of authentic witness of Nat Turner.

My senior year of college found me as a transfer student at Fisk University in Nashville away from my previous school of three years, Dillard University, due to the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina that left New Orleans uninhabitable for close to three months in the fall of 2005. That fall semester, I enrolled in my first African American history class and the final paper was to compare a 20th century figure with a 19th century one. I chose Rev. Dr. Vernon Johns, pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and pastoral predecessor to Martin Luther King, and Nat Turner. I knew the story of Turner; I had heard it all my

life. What I didn't know at the time was that he had told his story to a white lawyer while in jail awaiting execution following the bloody insurrection. I went to the library and read the short confession—as it were—and was awe struck at the ways in which his faith and his relationship with God were front and center to what he was famous for; what would ultimately result in his death.

In this morning's focal text we see Jacob whose faith and relationship with God were front and center in his life as well. Immediately prior to these few verses in this first book of the Torah and of the Old Testament, Jacob is on the run first from his father-in-law Laban and then from his brother Esau—the one whom he stole the birthright. Esau has even sworn to kill Jacob upon sight! Jacob finally makes up with Laban, but is still on the run from his older brother Esau. In an attempt to use a bit of deception, Jacob has sent the travelers away from him, and at the last minute sends his two wives—Rachel and Leah—and children across the river which has left him alone.

Somehow a random man ends up wrestling with Jacob all night. In the dark. Just the two of them.

Upon daybreak the man demands to be let go, Jacob puts a counter-offer on the table saying “not until you bless me.” The man declares that Jacob has wrestled and has struggled with God and has won—Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation says that Jacob “came through—and it results in a name change. Jacob's new name is Israel which means one who struggles with God.

So obvious question: why did I choose to use the sermon title with the obvious Nat Turner movie reference? For starters, the Genesis story shows us what wrestling with God can look like in our orthodox beliefs. Jacob wrestles with a man—the Hebrew Masoretic text never refers to this other individual as an angel or as God incarnate—and at daybreak demands a blessing and receives it! He gets a name change and he lives to tell about it. But Nat Turner challenges our traditional theologies. Nat Turner didn't “prevail” or “come through” in the ways Jacob did. Quite the contrary: he died. Turner was hanged to death. And others labeled as co-conspirators died alongside him.

But we remember Nat Turner's name. Why? Because ultimately he contributed to the birth of this nation in which many of us live. The story of rebellion and resistance by enslaved Africans and their descendants was and is central to the fabric of this nation. Jacob's story, this particular unit in the Hebrew Bible, puts a nice bow on the story because all Jacob does is ask for the blessing and he gets it. The story of Nat Turner, someone who wrestled with God his whole life, plagued with visions and moved by his convictions, never saw that blessing in his life time. While even the market forces of this country historically suppressed such a story as this from being told, at the end of the day, no one remembers the name of Nat Turner's slave master. No one knows the name of the judge that sentenced Nat Turner. No one remembers the names of those who were killed because they benefitted and perpetuated the selling and ownership of other humans.

Jacob and Nat Turner stand as diametrically opposite examples of how God operates. If I stood here today and told you that all you need to do is stay in the struggle until morning comes and demand a blessing from God—and all your troubles would be over—then I would cease being faithful to the complexities of God. I would be putting God into a box if I limited the ability and operation of God to a behavioral formula. In good conscience, I can't simply tell someone who's in the midst of a struggle that the answer to your wrestling is to simply ask for your blessing. And as Henry Emerson Fosdick

once noted, you can't treat God like a cosmic bellhop who comes and answers your every request. To be true to the text here in Genesis here is what I offer.

I believe that this text is most tailored to teach us that wrestling with God is okay. Maybe I'm the only person who finds great comfort in that, but I suspect I'm not alone. Conventional wisdom invokes the poetic line from James Weldon Johnson that says "your arms are too short to box with God." I used to hear that phrase often enough as a young child. It had a way of ending a discussion and it created a fearful mystery around God-centered things; that if you didn't understand it you didn't have permission to question it. I'm sure all of us at one time or another, if you grew up in church, heard someone say "You shouldn't question God" or some derivation of that. Questioning, as I see it, is very often what wrestling and struggling with God looks like on a day-to-day basis. The struggling and the wrestling becomes a metaphysical wrestling match where some questions give you points, and other questions result in your opponent receiving points.

Even the idea of *wrestling* already invokes the idea of one person versus another, and in this story it's Jacob versus God. I would suspect that this moment of Jacob in this deserted space is more metaphorical for his life up until that point—that Jacob had been wrestling with God his whole life and it culminated in a wilderness wrestling match. But the deeper revelation that this text illuminates for us today is that as individuals and as corporate groups we need to be okay with not seeing or understanding God at face value; that our faith grows deeper and stronger when we don't shy away from questions. And let's be honest, just because one raises a question or probes a bit deeper doesn't mean that they're having a faith crisis, it just means that they're trying to deepen their faith.

These questioning moments in our lives, these life moments in which we plunge the nethermost regions of our being often times arise around crises. When we have to deal with the unexpected death of a loved one, even sometimes the expected death; when cancer comes into the body of a cherished family member; when the news of yet another unarmed black civilian death at the hands of police officer becomes front page news—these are the life moments that leave us with more questions than we have answers. And this morning's text lets us know that that is okay because wrestling with God is okay.

This text also teaches us that wrestling with God can sometimes be isolating and it happens in the dark. This text provides us with a spirit in the dark theology. Where we often times like to think of God-encounters in the light, this is an instance where Jacob encounters God in the dark. Since ancient Hebraic culture predates the Greco-Roman empire where we see the dichotomy of world—light vs. dark, body vs. soul, heaven vs. hell, God vs. Satan—it allows us to see things from a different lens. Think about it, compared to the New Testament many of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible passages provide a different working theology. Even the psalmist makes the theological declaration about the expanse of God being so far-reaching that "even if I go up to the heavens, you are there; even if I make my bed in Sheol, there you will be."

Seeing God at work in the dark is actually good news. If God can meet us in the dark places of life then that's something to shout about. Far too often we have been taught that in the darkest moments we need to do everything to either run to the light or be the light for someone else. Maybe, just maybe,

God is meeting us in the dark. In the dark moments of despair—God is there. In the pain and loss—God is there. As those who live with mental illness—God is still there.

This text ultimately revealed that God honors your struggle. In Jacob's story, the birth of a nation began with his name being changed to Israel. In the case of Nat Turner, while he was not a part of a generation that saw freedom here on earth, but he was very much a catalyst during his time here on earth and even years later as a symbol of freedom, echoing the Negro spiritual that "before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free." Frederick Douglass, in 1857, four years prior to the American Civil War delivered an oration that has been titled by the first words out of his mouth that day: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." Nat Turner's insurrection was a freedom fighter move; reserved for one engaged in the struggle of liberation. His insurrection moved the clock forward on the emancipation of enslaved Africans in order to birth a nation that can live up to the highest of human ideals. Jacob, struggled in the dark and emerged a changed man: the father of a nation—and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. His limp will be his testimony.

I conclude with this: don't be afraid to tell your story of how you wrestled and struggled with God in the dark. This is the opportunity for your authentic self to come forward. God isn't looking for folks who are fake, disingenuous or inauthentic. Your authentic testimony has the power to liberate someone else. Don't be afraid to tell the genuine story of your tears. If God did for you, don't be afraid to share it. You might be the one person that God is waiting on to share your story with the person sitting next to you. There's the well-known gospel song that says "When I look back over my life, and I think things over; I can truly say that I've been blessed, I've got a testimony." I encourage you that after this service is done that you turn to your neighbor and share one good thing that God did for you in a moment in your life in which you thought God had abandoned you. The writer of Revelation says "and they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Use your testimony to bless someone in the struggle.

As the hymn says "Be not dismayed what e'er betide you—whatever that struggle may be, God will take of you. Beneath God's wings of love abide, God will take care of you."