

Trinity 10 (2020)

We have all seen signs reading “Under Construction.” It might be on a roadway or in front of a building site.

The same thing can be said of Christians. We are “Under Construction”, and, in this case, the contractor is God.

E. Stanley Jones was a 20th Methodist missionary and author. He was fond of saying, “We are Christians *in the making*.”

In his book *Conversion*, he tells of his own conversion. He was still in high school when he came to Christian faith, and so dramatic was his turn around that his school mates began noticing something different about him.

In fact, one day the old, rough gang he ran around with cornered him. A teacher overheard the conversation.

“Sam, you ain’t been converted, have you? Tell us it ain’t so. Tell us it ain’t so.”

Well, he felt so forcefully about what the Lord had done in his life that he blurted out:

“To hell I ain’t. I have been converted.”

He went on to say that he would not use that language today. He further explained that when God captures a man’s heart and life, He does not clean up all his faults and hang-ups at once. It’s an on-going process.

We under construction . . . Christians in the making. I like that! Don’t you?

Well, this is a good summary of what was going on in Jacob’s life. He was a man under construction, and the contractor was the Lord.

In last week’s Lectionary reading, we found him having to leave home in a hurry. The reason for his haste was that his brother Esau was out to kill him because Jacob had tricked him out the blessing that would customarily have gone to him as the elder son.

As the sun began to go down, Jacob camped at a place which would later be called Bethel. There, with only a stone for a pillow, God found him and granted him a vision of a ladder or perhaps ziggurat leading up to heaven.

It would be through Jacob's offspring that such a ladder would be built, that the span between man and God would be bridge, that a Mediator would come.

I think it would be correct to say that Jacob was 'converted' that night . . . his life was turned around. He went from being a trickster to a vessel chosen by God.

The next morning he responded to God's call by pledging his fidelity to the God of his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac. More than that, he promised to give back to God a tenth of all that God gave him.

There was nothing phony about Jacob's turn around, but God was not finished with him, as we learn in today's Old Testament reading.

As it opens, 20 years have passed, and now Jacob is on the way back to the land of his birth and the land God had promised to give his descendants.

More than that, he is not coming home empty handed.

God had richly blessed him during his stay in Haran, the city of his mother Rebekah's people.

There Jacob had acquired much livestock, two wives and a parcel of children. What more could any man want in life?

No doubt he was excited about going home, but also fearful because of what Esau might do.

And so, he did what many have done down through the years when faced with danger. He prayed. He asked for God's protection.

But something else happened that night. A mysterious man showed up who wrestled with him all night. Even though this man was superior in strength, Jacob would not concede. Finally, as day was breaking, the man touched Jacob's thigh, resulting in him not being able to walk without a limp.

We might say Jacob won by losing. What do I mean by this statement? Well this. As it turned out this mysterious stranger was none other than the angel of the Lord, perhaps a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ.

What seems to be going here is that God has to ‘break’ Jacob in order to make him. He has to render him weak in order to make him strong.

I think we are right in seeing a parallel between Jacob’s limp and Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ in the New Testament.

God permitted both for the self-same purpose: to keep the one so afflicted reliant on Himself. To fit him for service.

And I suppose God still, at times, employs this tactic. He leaves with us some weakness, not to break us but to make us.

So, if you have gone to the Lord and asked Him to take away something in your life that is painful and He hasn’t done so, it’s not because He is on the phone with several other people and is unable to take your call right now.

It may well be that He plans to give you something better, namely His strength and abiding presence. When you are weak, He is strong.

But Jacob gets more than a limp out of this encounter with the Almighty. He also gets a new name.

No longer is he to be called Jacob, the grasper and trickster, but Israel. This new name means something on the order of “one who strives with God and prevails.”

Jacob is now in a position to fulfil God’s covenant purposes, namely to be the progenitor of the 12 tribes of Israel. It will be from one of these tribes – the tribe of Judah – that Jesus the Saviour will come.

Even with this new name, I think it is safe to say God was not finished with him. More work was needed.

And isn’t the same true with us? Remember what E. Stanley Jones said: We are Christians in the making.

And, as with Jacob, for that to take place some ‘wrestling’ may be required.

I wonder if you have ever had to do any wrestling? I have. Before going into the Christian ministry, God had to do some ‘wrestling’ in my life.

As a young man, when the thought of offering myself for the ordained ministry would come into my mind, I would immediately throw up an excuse why that was not feasible. One of my excuses was I didn’t know where the money would come from to go to theological college.

Then one day while driving along a certain highway, in a flash, that excuse was taken away. The money was in fact in an account to which I had recently gained access. At that moment, I found myself saying yes to God’s call.

So, dramatic was the moment that I pencilled in a little sun in the block for February 7, 1984, in my day planner. I still have this book.

Was, the wrestling over? No, I am still ‘under construction’, and I suspect the same is true in your life. In closing, let me say, don’t resent it.

Instead say: “I surrender all.” “Wherever you lead, Lord, I will go.” “You are the potter; I am the clay. Mould me and make after your way.”