

Trinity 10 (2025)

Once it was not uncommon to see older men sitting in front of a country store whittling.

This past week I saw a video in which this art was carried to even higher level. It featured an artist in a studio carving religious objects. She started with an ordinary piece of wood and began the tedious work of subtraction.

After a while, a rough figure appeared, the corpus for a crucifix, but the process was far from complete. It might be days even weeks before that artist finished her masterpiece.

I want to suggest that is how God, the Master Carver, works.

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 experience of coming to Christian faith. It took place when he was still in high school, and it changed him.

Members of the old, rough gang he ran around with were some of the first to notice.

One day they cornered him and began quizzing 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.

This was certainly true in the life Jacob, the third of the great patriarchs in Genesis, who is the focus of today's Old Testament lesson.

Last week we found Jacob on the run, trying to get away from his older brother Esau who was out to kill him.

True to his name, which means "Supplanter", Jacob had used deceit to secure the blessing that should have gone to Esau. He had tricked his aged, blind father by impersonating his older brother. You, I am sure, remember the story.

On Jacob's first night away from home, God came to him and gave him the vision we heard about in last Sunday's reading – the vision of the ladder reaching up to heaven.

It would be through Jacob's offspring that such a ladder would be built . . . that the chasm between the Creator and his rebel race would be bridged.

He was to be the bearer of the covenant promises made first to his grandfather Abraham and then to his father Isaac.

In some sense, Jacob was 'converted' that night. Yet, more 'carving' was needed. God was not finished.

As today's passage opens, 20 years have passed. Jacob is now on the way back to 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. That is where he had been during those 20 years.

In Haran, he had acquired much livestock, not one but two wives – Leah and Rachel -- and a parcel of children. What more could any man want in life?

No doubt Jacob was excited about going home, yet he was also fearful. What would be Esau's response when he showed up?

As he makes this journey, we find him vacillating between his old mode of operation, scheming, taking matters into own hands, and trusting and following God.

He both devises an elaborate plan to propitiate Esau's wrath AND earnestly prays.

In today's reading, before arriving in Caanan, we find God again appearing and doing some more 'carving' in his life.

A mysterious man shows up and wrestles with him all night.

Even though this man was superior in strength, Jacob would not concede. In the end, he would not let go of him until he received a blessing.

Finally, as day was breaking, the Man touched Jacob's thigh, resulting in him limping the rest of his days.

We might say Jacob won by losing. /// What do I mean by that?

Well this. As it turned out this mysterious stranger was none other than the angel of the Lord, likely a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ.

What seems to be going on 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 to see a parallel between Jacob's limp and Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' in the New Testament. The latter story is written up in 2 Corinthians 12.

In this familiar passage, Paul wrestles with some unnamed malady. Three times he asks God to take this thing away. Finally, comes God's answer.

It is: this 'thorn' is there for a purpose. It was to cause Paul to lean wholly on God.

God's answer to his prayer was: **“My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”**

Paul's response: **“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”**

So, there is a parallel between Paul's 'thorn' and Jacob's 'limp'.

God permitted both for the exact same purpose: Not to make weak, but to make strong. To fit both for greater service.

God still employs this tactic. He leaves us with us some limps and thorns . . . not to break us, but to make us.

Perhaps you have experienced something like this in your life. You've prayed and asked God to take away some malady or burden, but He has not done so. He seems silent.

What's going on? Is He on the phone with several other customers . . . too busy to deal with your request?

No! It may well be that He plans to give you something better, namely His strength and

abiding presence. He wants you to put aside your scheming and lean on Him.

Going back to Jacob, he gets more than a limp out of his 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 “one who strives with God and prevails.”

Jacob is now ready 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 David and later Jesus will come.

But even with this new name, I think it is safe to say that God was not finished with Jacob. More whittling was needed.

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

the making. God give us gifts, but they must be given back to God – surrendered -- so they can be perfected and become a blessing to the Body, the Church

I wonder if *you* have ever had to do any wrestling with God?

I have. Before going into the pastoral 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 out reasons what that was not possible.

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, and it has made all the difference.

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

Was God finished? No, I am still 'under construction', and I suspect the same is true in your life.

Returning to my original metaphor, the Master Carver continues to carve. Conversion continues.

Put yourself into Jacob's story. If you find God wrestling with you, go for the blessing. Win by losing.

With the hymn writer say, and with these words I close:

*All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.*

*. . . .Make me, Savior, wholly Thine;
Let me feel Thy Holy Spirit,
Truly know that Thou art mine.*

I surrender all.

Make this your prayer. Do it now before
leaving this building.