

Story and Meditation: Out of Joint

August 2, 2020

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 32:22-31

by *Eric Anderson*

The 'apapane panted in and out, trying to catch its breath – as quietly as possible – as it pressed its body into the mass of ohia leaves and twigs. In that thick foliage, it hoped, any hint of his red feathers would look like lehua blossoms. It could hear the i'o call overhead with some frustration. Its eyes hadn't spotted him, it seemed. The voice of the i'o called and called, but it faded as the hungry hawk soared away, seeking its dinner elsewhere.

The 'apapane breathed deeply now that he wasn't holding his breath.

Cautiously, he hopped out on top of the leafy cluster. After a careful look across the sky, he launched himself into the air. He ached. His mad dash through the branches to escape the i'o had used every muscle he knew about and a few that he didn't realize he had. He also stung. The first he'd known the i'o was there had been the slash of its talons at his wing, a strike that had – mostly – missed. Then it had been all a confusion of flapping wings, dodging through leaves and branches, dodging tree trunks, with twigs pulling at his feathers along the way.

He got back home safely. Once he was there, his parents made as much of a fuss over him as you'd expect. If they'd been doves, they would have cooed their distress and their comfort. Looking himself over, he found that the i'o's talons and his escape had had their cost: two primary feathers on his right wing and another on his left were gone. He looked at the gaps with dismay.

"I can't go about like this," he said. "That's too many feathers gone. I'll never be able to fly."

He looked about at his "home" tree, which had a few flower clusters but not, he feared, enough to keep him from going hungry before the feathers grew again.

"What will I do?" he asked.

His parents were puzzled. "Why can't you fly?" asked his mother.

"Look!" He showed them his wings. "I can't fly like this."

"Why not?" asked his father.

"It's all wrong! It's unbalanced. I'll never keep stable in the air. I'll look ridiculous even if I don't just crash right into a tree or into the ground."

“Are you just afraid of looking odd when you fly?” asked his mother.

“No!” he said. “It’s all wrong. It will never work.”

“But,” said his father, “didn’t you just fly back here like that?”

Sure enough, without noticing it, he had.

Jacob, the great con man of Genesis, had to walk from his wrestling match on an injured hip. The ‘apapane had to fly on injured wings. You and I, we get to carry on with life even when life, when we, when everything around us is out of joint. On Thursday, Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s “Word of the Day” was “catastrophe,” which seems all too appropriate for the second of three days in a row of triple-digit increases in COVID-19 diagnoses in the state of Hawai’i, including the first day in which O’ahu alone had over one hundred new cases.

An attack by an i’o is starting to sound rather tame.

This week an Attorney General professed himself unaware that armed people had threatened the life of the governor of Michigan during demonstrations in that state’s capital in May, while justifying use of tear gas against unarmed demonstrators in Portland, Oregon, demonstrators that included the city’s mayor. Tear gas, interestingly enough, is banned by international treaty. You can’t use it against an army. In the United States, you can use it against unarmed civilians.

This week we honored the memory of John Lewis and his long, painful, weaponless, and unfinished crusade for a just society. Three former Presidents attended the service and a fourth sent condolences. Congressman Lewis left these words to remind us not just how much we’ve lost, but how much we still need to do for the generations to come: “Like so many young people today, I was searching for a way out, or some might say a way in, and then I heard the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on an old radio. He was talking about the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.”

Alabama State Police trooper struck the 25-year-old John Lewis repeatedly on the head in 1965, fracturing his skull. He could have died that day. He survived.

On Thursday, we learned that the American economy, under the burden of a pandemic, dropped 32.9% in the worst quarter ever recorded. We also learned that a President wants to delay the November election because voting-by-mail doesn’t work – something that should come as something of a surprise to us here in Hawai’i, since it’s been serving us rather well.

To say that the world is out of joint is, I think, to put it mildly.

And I, for one, am tired of the wrestling match. Is anyone else with me? If you've ever been tempted to say, "Amen," to the preacher, I would guess this is the time.

Jacob, now – he wrestled all night. That's a short time for a pandemic but a long time for an actual wrestling match. He held on despite his fatigue. He held on despite his injury. He held on and demanded... a blessing.

Our wrestling matches with the world right now are not ones in which blessing is the prize leaps to mind. Pandemics do not bless – the blessing comes when they end. Race-based injustice does not bless – the blessing comes when it ends. Violence does not bless – the blessing comes when it ends.

Our cue from Jacob and from John Lewis is to hold on in the midst of the struggle and to demand that blessing, to demand the practices that will reduce transmission of the pandemic virus, to demand the laws that will reduce the injustices, to demand the personal behavior that will limit bigotry. It will not be easy, it will not be pretty, and it will not be painless. As Beth L. Tanner writes at *Working Preacher*, "Life is sometimes like that. Things happen that cannot be rationalized or easily understood. We survive by nothing more elegant than not giving up."

Jacob held on. He would not give up. He survived. He bore his pain away from this encounter and said that he had seen the face of God and lived.

Then he went to see Esau, the brother whom he had defrauded years ago, the brother whose inheritance and blessing he had stolen. He went to see the brother coming toward him with a force of four hundred men. He went to see the brother who hated him, and he met a brother who embraced him. And what did he say, this man who had survived wrestling with God and now survived reunion with his brother?

"Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Hang on, people. Hang on in the struggle. Hang on in the world out of joint. Hang on in the pandemic and the economy and the racism and the evils. Hang on to endure the trauma. Hang on to weather the hatred. Hang on to demand the blessing. Hang on to see the face of God.

Amen.