HYMN INTERPRETATION

“Wrestling Jacob”

JAMES HART BRUMM

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

This wondrous, enigmatic, rich passage from Jacob’s story in Genesis is the subject of an equally wondrous, enigmatic, rich (though certainly not brief) hymn by Charles Wesley. “Come, O thou traveler unknown,” which Wesley titled “Wrestling Jacob,” first appeared in his Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1742, five years before “Love divine, all loves excelling,” and three years after the first version of “Hark! The herald angels sing.” Of its fourteen stanzas, four are included in most hymnals when it appears at all. Carlton Young did a great service to the church by including all the stanzas in a text-only version (immediately after the four-stanza version prepared for congregational singing) in The United Methodist Hymnal.

Everyone reading this journal is familiar with Charles Wesley. Erik Routley reminds us that, from what Wesley calls his Methodist “conversion” on May 24, 1738, until his death fifty years later, he wrote 8,989 religious poems, of which something over 6,000 qualify as hymns. That would mean Wesley wrote an average of 3.4 hymns per week, “assuming him to have died in the act of writing.” All of our hymnals contain several of Charles Wesley’s hymns, some of which we sing probably more than once every year.

Yet I include this particular hymn in my series of hymns we do not sing enough. There are two reasons for this, I suspect. One reason is that the text is so specifically associated with this particular scripture, which only appears in The Revised Common Lectionary once in the three-year cycle, and then in the middle of summer. The other reason is the difficulty in assigning the text to an appropriate tune. RHODYSMEDRE is a popular match and is easily sung, but it fails to express the struggle and anguish that Genesis describes and Wesley paints so brilliantly. While it isn’t as much of an affront to the text as setting “O sacred head, now wounded” to MORNING SONG, it is akin to setting that passion hymn to AURELIA. The use of the tune CANDLER, based on the Scottish tune “Ye banks and braes” in The United Methodist Hymnal (#386), is quite interesting, but not much more satisfying. Carlton Young admits that Routley’s tune WOODBURY and the folk tune VERNON (in Christian Harmony, the revised edition of 1873) are better matches, but neither is eminently singable. I have only heard Routley’s tune sung congregationally in the chapel at Westminster Choir College, hardly a typical parish gathering.

Even if we cannot do it musical justice, the text is worth reading and re-reading. Even Wesley’s title, “Wrestling Jacob,” operates on several levels. Are we wrestling with Jacob? Are we to see ourselves as Jacob, doing the wrestling? Or is this just a description of who Jacob was, and who we are? The ambiguities continue in the hymn itself, as they do in the scripture. In Genesis, there is no place where we are specifically told that Jacob wrestled with an angel; the text says “a man,” and then suggests that Jacob wrestled with God, and except for the injury to his hip, leaves open the possibility that he dreamed it all (there is some similarity to the story of his dream about a ladder earlier in the Jacob narrative). Wesley takes the ambiguity a step further; already, in the third line of stanza three, he has moved from Jacob’s struggle at Peniel to Wesley’s (and ours, the Christian reader might say) own struggle with Christ, “the Man who died for me.” And, even then, we find ourselves wrestling with our own sinfulness, our human nature struggling against Christ, and our intellect striving “till I thy name, thy nature know.”

As is generally true with Wesley, who wrote as someone who was imbued with scripture, this text makes numerous allusions to passages other than the story. The second stanza hints at Isaiah 49:16 (NRSV): “Sure, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands,” part of the song of the Suffering Servant, part of a prophecy of Israel’s return from exile. Stanza three touches on Romans 5:8 (NRSV): “The proof of God’s amazing love is this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Stanza four, with its mention of the “unutterable name” of God, reaches back to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The fifth stanza reaches back to II Corinthians 12:10 (NRSV): “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” The subsequent stanzas make allusions to John 12:24 (telling Christ’s crucifixion), James 5:16, 1 Corinthians 4:11.
Come, O thou Traveller unknown, whom still I hold but cannot see; my company before is gone, and I am left alone with thee; with thee all night I mean to stay and wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell thee who I am, my misery, or sin declare; thyself hast called me by my name, look on thy hands, and read it there; but who, I ask thee, who art thou? Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

In vain thou strugglest to get free; I never will unloose my hold; art thou the Man that died for me? the secret of thy love untold; wrestling, I will not let thee go till I thy name, thy nature know.

Wilt thou not yet to me reveal thy new, unutterable name? Tell me, I still beseech thee, tell, to know it now resolved I am; wrestling I will not let thee go till I thy name, thy nature know.

’Tis all in vain to hold thy tongue or touch the hollow of my thigh, though every sinew be unstrung, out of my arms thou shalt not fly; wrestling I will not let thee go till I thy name, thy nature know.

Yet there is also a larger struggle reflected here, perhaps Wesley’s struggle with the Enlightenment. Four of the first seven stanzas end with the line “till I thy name, thy nature know,” while the final six stanzas conclude “thy nature, and thy name is Love.” The human desire to be able to know and quantify our world and everything in it comes into contact with Love, known yet never fully knowable. We have the solution to the mystery leading to an even greater Mystery, and yet Wesley seems to find this mystery comforting. It is enough to know that God is love, without knowing entirely what that means, and to live forever in the joy of Love’s presence. As a pietist and a scholar myself, I can respect that resolution. There is also the pattern of guilt, grace, and gratitude here, consistent with an evangelical, pietist understanding of the believer’s relationship with God.

It would be wonderful to have a tune for congrega-
tional singing that could help unlock the intellectual and emotional depths of this poetry. Yet, even then, it would be difficult to sing even most of the text in a typical congregational situation. This is a hymn that can be preached, which I did last summer, using several stanzas with a brief introduction. I look forward to doing that again, or perhaps even making it a framework for a hymn festival. It is a work of art that we must allow to inspire more Christians.

NOTES

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I know thee, Saviour, who thou art, Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend; nor wilt thou with the night depart, but stay, and love me to the end; thy mercies never shall remove; thy nature, and thy name is Love.

The Sun of Righteousness in me hath rose with healing in his wings, withered my nature's strength; from thee my soul its life and succour brings; my help is all laid up above, thy nature, and thy name is Love.

Contented now; upon my thigh I halt, till life's short journey end; all helplessness, all weakness, I on thee alone for strength depend, nor have I power, from thee to move; thy nature, and thy name is Love.

Lame as I am, I take the prey, hell, earth and sin with case o'ercome; I leap for joy, pursue my way, and as a bounding hart fly home thro' all eternity to prove thy nature, and thy name is Love.