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Pentecost 24C Offering of Letters
Peace, Seattle
October 20, 2013
Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 18:1-8

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

I joined Kai's 4/5 grade class on a fieldtrip to the Cedar River this last week and it was amazing.

The class is studying the life cycle of Pacific salmon and we were at the Cedar to observe first hand the run of SOCKEYE that have made their way from Puget Sound, through the Chittenden Locks to Lake Washington, and are now swimming up the Cedar to spawn.

After parking at Ron Regis Park,[1] two miles east of I-405, we followed a trail past soccer and softball fields, to the south side of the river. And there we were immediately treated to a scene straight out of Nature Magazine: 30 yards away, on a gravel bar that split the stream in two, a Bald Eagle was tearing chunks off a beached salmon with his beak.[2]

Kai's teacher Scott Rose, whose passion for this subject was present at every turn, allowed us to feast our eyes on the sight, before leading us toward a place further downriver where he promised an even more intimate encounter with the migrating salmon.[3]

As we moved through thick stands of invasive Japanese knotweed, and past a recently reclaimed tributary, our noses told us what our eyes soon confirmed: Scott's promise held true.

Stepping out onto the graveled riverbank, we saw Sockeye wherever we looked, dead ones along the riverbank, and live ones in the river—males and females, battered and bruised, still struggling determinedly to move upriver and complete the task given them at birth: to return to their natal stream and sow the seeds for a new generation.

The scientific name of the species, *on-co-rhyn-chus nerka,* derives from the Greek words ***onkos*** or **hook**, and ***rynchos*** or **snout**,[4] and true to form, those grotesquely hooked snouts of the jacks were on full display at the head of brilliant red bodies whose color rivaled the vine maples nearby.

For at least 4 million years Pacific salmon have plied the waters of our region, following the course determined by their inner compass; journeying through an endless cycle of mass migration from stream to lake to ocean and back again.

How do they do it? How do they find their way home after living a year or more out in the Pacific? Biologists theorize that salmon may use the earth's magnetic field to navigate—along with other cues such as the ocean currents and the position of the sun—until they get close enough, and then they use an acute sense of smell to detect their natal stream…[5]

But the story behind their incredible feat continues to be cloaked in mystery.
One thing's for certain, it couldn't happen without the relentless, inner drive to achieve the goal of giving its life away, no matter what the odds.

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[1] Follow this LINK to map the location of Ron Regis Park.
[2] Follow this LINK to a video that Scott shot during the field trip.
[3] Follow this LINK to some video that Scott shot as he was scouting for the field trip.
[4] The term *"nerka"* comes from the Russian word for the species.
[5] From *The Miraculous Nature of Salmon* by Liz McKenzie, in the Wild Explorers website: http://www.encountersnorth.org/wildexplorer/salmon/natural-history.html

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Something of that kind of determination shows through in two of our texts today—in the wrestling match Jacob has at another river—the Jabbok—and in a story Jesus tells of a tenacious widow who won't take NO for an answer.

You remember Jacob's story:[6]

- The second born twin of Isaac and Rebekah, he robbed his brother Esau of both his birthright and his father's blessing and then skipped town.
- Over the 20 years that followed, Jacob did quite well for himself. In spite of his underhanded ways, God blessed him and he prospered.
- When God calls him back home, he goes, but somewhere along the way word reaches him that brother Esau is heading his way with 400 armed men, and he wonders: *Will this be the end?*

For Jacob, the river Jabbok is the boundary line between his old life and his new one; his past and his destiny. Sending his family and possessions across the ford, he spends his last night alone. As darkness descends, someone leaps on him from the shadows—and the wrestling match is on.

If you've ever wrestled mightily, inwardly; ever struggled for clarity about the purpose of life and where you're headed, then you know something of what this wrestling is about.

I'm not suggesting that we should interpret what's going on here only in psychological or spiritual terms—the physicality of this story as it's told is much too strong to ignore!

- We can hear these opponents panting,
- smell their sweat,
- feel their muscles turn to jelly as hour after hour the battle goes on…

…But as we'll see in the larger story that unfolds from here on out, Jacob's new name: ISRAEL – GRAPPLER WITH GOD – does become emblematic of a whole people's contentious spiritual relationship with the ONE TRUE GOD who is determined to bless them and—through them, the world—in spite of themselves.

As the light of a new day dawns, and we watch Jacob stumble across the river, like a spent salmon at the end of its journey, we know that something of substance, something vital for life—for moving its story forward—has taken place here at the river.

The most profound journeys in life, it seems, require a mighty struggle.

God loves a good wrestling match. Jesus was willing to go to the mat against the principalities and powers of this world bent on eviscerating our trust in the one true God whose mercy endures forever.

Christ self-emptying sacrifice took on death itself, and for a couple days it looked like death had won. But God raised him on the third day, and his resurrection forever changes the odds we face in our battles with whatever comes our way.

No story in nature captures Christ's self-giving more powerfully than the migrating salmon. Writer David Duncan puts it this way:

[6] See Genesis 25-32.

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> "The real sacrificial dramas of the Northwest, the Christ-like activity, as I saw it, was taking place … in the lives of the salmon…[in] the way they poured in from the sea in defiance of every threat, predator, and Pharisee, climbed increasingly troubled mountain streams, nailed their beautiful bodies to lonely beds of gravel, and died there not for anything they stood to gain, but for the sake of tiny silver offspring.[7]

Like the salmon who hurl themselves over every object in order to give themselves away; and like the relentless widow of Christ's parable who refuses to sit still or be silenced, we must never cease to seek after justice, to seek the common good.

As followers of Christ, we pay particular attention to the welfare of the last, the least, and the lost.

On any given day it may seem for all the world that too many obstacles stand in the way for the letters we write to achieve their desired end: a PLACE AT THE TABLE for everyone in our society.

But then we remember the salmon—who know what it means to swim upstream; know about sacrifice and obstacles that seem too great to overcome.

In a world in which there are no easy answers, we still have something and someone to guide us. He is the one who spent himself completely for us all. The one who said: I will never leave you or forsake you. The one who calls to us: Love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

[7] David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*, Sierra Club Books, p. 14.