

Wrestling God

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Genesis 32:22-32 (NRSV)

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. [23] He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. [24] Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. [25] 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. [26] Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." [27] So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." [28] Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel< /st1:country-region>, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." [29] Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. [30] So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." [31] The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. [32] Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

AN OLD GAELIC BLESSING

In my office I have a plaque with an Old Gaelic Blessing. It goes,

“May those who love us, love us
And those who don’t love us,
May God turn their hearts;
And if he doesn’t turn their hearts
May he turn their ankles
So we’ll know them by their limping.”

I think of this “blessing” when I think of Jacob. Jacob after his struggle with the stranger on the bank of the Jabbok River comes limping to meet his brother Esau.

If only Esau had known this Gaelic Blessing perhaps he would have been more careful. Jacob was not trustworthy. Jacob didn’t love anyone but Jacob.

The Bible tells us that Jacob’s striving to get the upper hand began at birth. First born Esau was a hulking, big red headed boy (even at birth) ... and right on his heel ... literally clinging to his heel was his tenacious brother.

So they named this second born son Jacob. That name can be translated variously as “heel grabber,” “he who supplants,” “trickster” or “he deceives.”

These biblical names always get me. Why would anyone name their son “trickster” or “he who deceives?” Can you imagine the ribbing Jacob must have taken from the other boys at school? It’s enough to give a guy a complex of some sort.

But, as it turns out Jacob was well named. Jacob lived up to (or perhaps we might say down to) his name.

170 POUND OF RAW AMBITION

God didn’t need to turn Jacob’s ankle or in this case wound his thigh. Everyone knew that Jacob was out to make it to the top by any means possible. And Esau should have known that more than most. After all through trickery Jacob stole Esau’s birthright and Esau’s blessing, and then ran away from home.

Someone said of a certain politician, “He’s 170 pounds of raw ambition.” Well, that was Jacob. He wanted it all, and he would step on anyone who got in his way, even his own brother.

Esau knew that. Anyone who ever came into contact with Jacob knew that. Uncle Laban certainly knew that. After getting everything he wanted Jacob packed up the wives, the kids, the servants and the herds, the dogs, the cats and left without telling anyone.

That was Jacob. Get what you can and then get out of Dodge.

Jacob said that God told him to leave, but I wouldn’t trust it. The last time Jacob heard from God at Bethel Jacob even tried to play “Let’s Make a Deal” with the Almighty Himself. Jacob, the trickster told God, “Here’s what I’ll do. You bless me, and give me what I want, and I’ll cut you in for 10% of the action.”

When Laban finally caught up with this caravan it was another tense moment for Jacob. (It seems that Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel had stolen the family idols before they left town.) But, Rachel managed to keep the idols hidden in a most unusual way, and Jacob managed to orchestrate an uneasy truce in a place called Mizpah.

It’s where we get the so called Mizpah blessing that we often use as a benediction. You know it. It’s the one that goes “May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other.”

In its original context it wasn’t a blessing at all. Instead, Laban (who also was an old trickster himself) and Jacob were reminding each other that if they didn’t keep their end of this uneasy truce, then they would have to answer to God. Isn’t it funny how people often swear on a Bible or use God’s name when they are planning to do something nefarious?

JUDGMENT ON THE JABBOK

But, for all of us there is a time of judgment. God is watching what goes on among us, and there will be a day of reckoning.

In today's lesson on the banks of the Jabbok River this day of reckoning or to put it more precisely, a night of reckoning had finally come for Jacob.

The closer he got to home the more Jacob's thought turned to the brother that he had greatly wronged so many years ago. He became profoundly frightened that his brother's fury had not lessened with the passage of time. If Jacob was known for his deception, Esau was known for his temper.

So Jacob did what he always tried to do. He tried to make a deal. He tried to buy himself out of trouble.

He sent messengers ahead with kind words and lavish gifts. He prayed and reminded the Lord that He had promised to bless him. After a lifetime of shifty dealing Jacob seemed to think that if could just make this one meeting with his brother go okay then everything else would go okay.

I think this is typical of those who live and die by the fast deal. No matter how far they fall or how desperate the situation they always believe that hope is just one big score away.

That's why people spend all their money on the lottery. That's why people pin all their hopes on a new job or a new relationship.

And then one night the past catches up with them, and they finally have to face the truth. Life is more than flocks and herds and wealth of various kinds. Life is more than respectability and the perfect image. Life is more than the fast deal. Life is even more than a beautiful family.

Life is about who you are and what you are in the presence of God. I suspect that all of us might find that encounter to be a frightening prospect, one that might keep us up at night. And so it was for Jacob.

Notice that Jacob sent all that he had been striving for and all that he loved the most ahead of him. He sent his family and all of his possessions to the "other side" of the river. (You have to wonder if this trickster sent his wives and children ahead as a test balloon. If he hears screams from the other side tomorrow he knows to rethink the idea of reunion!)

THE WRESTLING MATCH

Night fell and then Jacob was alone on the bank of the Jabbok. It was then that the stranger appeared and began to struggle with Jacob. The Bible says that Jacob wrestled with this man until daybreak.

A great deal of uncertainty revolves around the identity of the “man” who wrestled with Jacob. One possibility is that the man is Jacob’s conscience that appears to him in a dream. Certainly Jacob had a lot to feel guilty about. This is the way commentator Walter Bruggemann interprets it.

On this night of struggle Jacob enters into the deep unresolved issues that preoccupy his life. Bruggemann wrote,

“During the day, he is able to manage and take initiative. But at night, as for all of us, Jacob turns out to be vulnerable, and things rush powerfully beyond his control. His night is peopled by those uninvited and unwelcome in his life. But, they are the very ones with whom he has to come to terms, if he is to go home peaceably.”

I’m not sure if this is the correct interpretation or not. The Bible doesn’t say anything about this being a dream. But, it certainly wouldn’t lessen the power of the story if it was a dream. Most of us can identify with this kind of night time struggle.

I think Freud had it right. Sometimes our dreams and especially our nightmares tell us most clearly what we are afraid to name out loud.

All of us hide demons that sometimes come out at night. The demons are our worries about family and friends. The demons are a sorrow that is too deep to bear. The demons are a feeling of guilt that just won’t go away. The demons are a big decision that we are forced to make.

They disturb our sleep as we struggle with them, and they almost always leave us limping the next day.

Our demons are different. You have your demons, and I have mine. But, one thing is sure. We all have them. We all have those encounters by the river at night. We all have this struggle with the terrible stranger.

STRUGGLING WITH OUR BROTHER

If I had to name Jacob’s demon I would say that he is his brother, Esau. Though Jacob stole his brother’s birthright and ran away, I think Esau was always with Jacob ... in his dreams. Esau and Jacob, for all their faults were brothers and twins. They had a connection even though they were apart for a long time.

I read this week about some twins who were separated at birth and reunited 39 years later. The trajectory of their life was remarkably similar. Each man was six feet tall, weighed 180 pounds and looked totally identical. They had been married twice, first to a woman named Linda and then to a woman named Betty.

They named their first son James Allen. In childhood each boy had a dog named Toy, and they vacationed with their family at the same beach. Each worked part time in law enforcement, and they even shared a taste for the same brand of beer and cigarettes!

Now there's a story for the X files!

We could argue that some or all of this was just coincidence, but the story points out that all of us are connected to each other in ways that are deeper than we might imagine.

We cannot ignore our brother or sister even if we are estranged. We are connected in a way that defies time and space. Even those of us who leave home at an early age cannot get away from home. Home follows us wherever we go.

There is always a force that calls us home. And yet at the same time there is this force that drives us to be different from and better than those that have gone before us. I think you see this push/pull conflict most often at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Despite all of the problems of the past we hope that this year will be different, that the family reunion will be the idyllic one of our dreams. But, we end up fighting about the same old things ... trying to prove that we are the ones who are really blessed.

Jacob especially felt this push and pull in his life. He wanted to go home as a success. But, he was not sure if going home was really an option. The specter of the angry brother always haunted Jacob, and no matter how much he did and how much he achieved it was never enough. There was always this image of an angry, unforgiving brother that kept Jacob from going home.

But, now Jacob's hand was forced. He had to go home. He had burned his bridges with Uncle Laban. His only hope was to cross the Jabbok and face the long simmering stew of his brother's anger. There would be no rest for Jacob this night. The stranger who looked suspiciously like his brother saw to that. All night long they wrestled.

WOUNDED AND HEALED

But, when day was about to break the stranger got the upper hand. He struck Jacob on the thigh and put his hip out of joint. But, Jacob does not let go. Jacob, the heel grabber has been wrestling since before his birth and is not willing to let this stranger go. He wants to get a good look at him in the daylight. He wants to know his name, and he wants a blessing.

Maybe this was the ancient way of getting your opponent to say "uncle." I'm not sure.

But, the response of the night time stranger is odd. The stranger does not give in. The stranger does not give his name, rank and serial number. Instead, the stranger asks Jacob to give his name.

Jacob obliges, and then the stranger does something really strange. He renames Jacob. He says, "You are no longer called Jacob. You are Israel. You have struggled with God and people and have prevailed."

Jacob is not sure what this means. He asks the stranger to tell him his name, and the stranger refuses. Instead, he blesses Jacob and leaves.

Who was that masked man who wrestled with me all night long?

Jacob thinks that the mysterious stranger who looked a lot like his brother Esau could have been God in the flesh.

One thing is sure. Jacob is no longer Jacob after this night time encounter. Jacob is Israel. Israel means "God preserves." Instead of being the trickster who tries to grab on and climb his way to the top now he waits on God. Israel can no longer count upon living by his wits. Now he is aware of the truth. All of life is a gift from God.< /FONT>

This new insight is a blessing for many people. Not only is a new man formed but a new nation is formed as well. Just as Jacob struggled with God so the nation of Israel will struggle with God in the years ahead. And often on the dark banks of the Jabbok River it will look like all is lost.

But, the God who struggles with us in the middle of the night, the God who will not let us go is always there. This God formed and gave his people a new name and a new life over and over again. And this miracle is still happening. God is always ready to give his wounded people a new name and a new life.

THE BELOVED ENEMY

I think that all of us at one time or another needs to camp alone on the other side of the Jabbok River. We need to struggle with the brokenness of our life. We need to think about those we have cheated and wronged. We need to think about the many ways that we have failed the ones we love the most.

This is not an easy retreat. Such an honest evaluation may well lead us to despair.

We may think that we have cheated too many people to be given a new life. We may think that reconciliation with our brother or sister is just not possible. We may think that there is no way to overcome the murderous rage that prevents people from coming together.

But, God disagrees. God loves us too much to leave us in despair on the banks of the Jabbok River. And so God wrestles with us. God gives us a new name and a new life.

I had a theology professor who used to say, "In God's love, God is just. In God's justice God loves."

I think Jacob is a good example.

God loved Jacob too much to let him continue on his destructive and selfish path. God loved Jacob enough to judge him.

God literally pulled the rug out from under his feet and wrestled him to the ground. God hurt him that through the pain he might be saved ... that through this moment of truth he might see the face of God and be changed.

God is our beloved enemy as well. God loves us too much to let us go on as we are.

It often hurts to make the change that is necessary. Didn't Jesus warn us that his coming would not bring peace but division? Didn't Jesus warn us that the old way of life would have to do in order to live in a new way?

The old way of life will die hard. The old way will struggle to stay. There will be much kicking and screaming in this process. The struggle will leave us with wounds that will be with us for the rest of our life.

But, the Bible also tells us that some wounds can heal as well as hurt.

Jacob, now named Israel, limps home, a man changed and humbled. And Jesus Christ staggers out of a tomb on broken feet, bearing on his body the pain of our defeat.

A God who is willing to struggle with us and for us is an awesome sight. It hurts to take up that cross, but it is the only way to finally make it home.

And so this morning we once again look upon that sight. When we take the Lord's Supper we talk about body broken and blood shed.

But, we also talk about resurrection, new life and a hope for life eternal.

Is God struggling with you this day? Is God keeping you awake at night? Is the struggle you have with a brother or sister really a struggle with One who wants to give you a new name and a new life?

Wounds can heal you know. Sometimes amazing grace can only be experienced after the long dark night of the soul.

But, then we are able to catch a glimpse of God, and we are surprised to learn that he looks ever so much like a brother or sister that we know so well.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH