

Wrestling With God  
Genesis 32: 22-31

Today's sermon is about wrestling with God, with life, and with your own self. Many times underneath our serene surface a wrestling is going on. It is like what is called "the duck syndrome": on the surface the duck glides along, underneath the webbed feet are paddling as fast as they can.

Can wrestling be a place of blessing? Helen Keller said: "The struggle of life is one of our greatest blessings. It makes us patient, sensitive and God-like. It teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

In our text today Jacob is at the river Jabbok wrestling with God. Or was it an angel, or was it with himself? Sometimes they are all rolled up together.

Growing up I was introduced to Jacob with this child's song:

Who was born a twin

Many years ago?

Who was born a twin?

Tell me if you know.

Jacob was his name.

Esau was his brother.

Isaac was his dad

Rebekah was his mother.

It turned out to be a pretty dysfunctional family.

## I

From his birth Jacob was striver, a cheat, a deceiver. He was born a twin, but born second—which gave great advantages to his twin brother Esau. Special honor and double the material benefits went to the first born. The advantages given the first born were so considerable that when twins were born a midwife tied a red thread around the wrist of the first born so they would not be confused.

Jacob was born clutching the heel of his brother. To hold another's heel is to try to trip them up, to supplant them. Jacob's very name means "heel-holder", and it became his destiny.

You may remember the stories of how Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright and blessing.

One afternoon Esau came in from hunting, famished for supper. Jacob, helping his mother cook, offered this bargain: "If you give me your birthright, I'll give you this bowl of stew." Esau hungrily agreed. And it was only later, his stomach full, that he realized how he had been tricked.

Jacob's mother Rebekah favored him and believed Jacob was the one who really deserved the birthright and blessing, so she coached Jacob in another deceit.

Old, blind father Isaac said to Esau, "Go, kill some game and make me a stew. Bring it to me and I'll give you your father's blessing."

Later that day Jacob came into Isaac's room carrying a steaming stew disguised as Esau. He wore Esau's clothes so he would smell like Esau and put furry animal skins on his arms so he would be hairy like his brother. Duped by his son, Isaac gave the blessing due Esau to Jacob. It was something that could not be undone. Later, Esau would cry out: Father, do you have but one blessing to give?!

When Esau heard what had happened he vowed to kill his brother, and mother Rebekah helped Jacob escape the home and go to another country.

Jacob, the cheat, the imposter fled. His whole life was built on bargaining for grace. He may have suffered with what psychologists call "the imposter syndrome." We may be most successful in life but we feel like an imposter. "If people really knew me", we say, "I wouldn't be here"....Or, "If they really knew me, they wouldn't love me."

Fast forward. Jacob traveled to Haran where he met a wealthy land-owner and married both his daughters in sequence, first Leah, then Rachel. Between them and their maid-servants Jacob fathered 12 sons who came the 12 tribes of Israel! Just your traditional biblical family unit! A con-artist had become the father of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jacob, now wealthy with two wives and a caravan of goods, left Haran to return home and to his brother Esau. Did his soul ache for reunion and reconciliation?

As he made his way home, he heard that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Scared for his life, Jacob sent ahead a caravan of riches to his brother. Was he hoping to appease his brother's anger? Was it a peace offering of penitence?

Jacob arrived at the river Jabbok near dark and sent his wives and servants on ahead. Then he sat by the river alone.

As he waded into the water something or someone hit him. He may have wondered for a moment whether it was the mythic river god he'd heard stories about.

Then they began to wrestle. All night long they wrestled. Our Genesis text calls his opponent a man. Later scriptures called him an angel. After the battle

Jacob said it was God. But when he entered the stream he did not know what in heaven's name, or hell's, had gotten hold of him.

They wrestled 'til dawn. At some moments Jacob thought he was winning, but as night turned to day his opponent reached out and just touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of socket. Jacob knew then that the man could have vanquished him at any moment. Life can be like that; we think we have it under control, then chaos hits.

The other said to Jacob: "Let me go. It is daybreak."

Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

The other said, "What is your name?"

"My name is Jacob." (Remember, "heel-holder, hustler, cheat.")

Then the other said, "Your name shall be Israel; for you have striven with God and prevailed."

"What is your name?", Jacob asked. "Why do you wish to know?" said the other, then blessed him and vanished.

The other didn't give him his name, but Jacob realized that the one he had hold of and who had hold of him, the one who blessed him, was God.

Jacob named the place Peniel, which means “I have seen God face-to-face and lived.”

The episode ends with these words, “As the sun rose, Jacob passed Peniel limping on his hip.”

#### IV

What can we make of such a mysterious and powerful story? It is for me a wrestling with God, with life, with my own self. Somedays we wrestle with God, or what we’ve been taught about God. Sometimes reading the Bible is a wrestling. As I begin to prepare a sermon early in the week, it is like wrestling with scripture. I say to the text, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” Then I try to pass along the blessing I’ve gotten. Once in a while, mid-week I say, “This is not going to work!” And I go hunting another text.

Sometimes we wrestle with God, the God we’ve been taught. Sometimes with life, sometimes with ourselves, trying to find our truest self, hunting for a blessing.

When tragedy strikes for ourselves or others we love, we may shake our fists at God. Why!?, we ask. The Bible is full of fist-shaking moments. Beset by unrelenting calamity Job shouts to God: “You are using me for target practice!”

I've quoted Eli Wiesel the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner a few times; I did last week. As a boy he was in a concentration camp at Auschwitz and watched his parents dragged away to be executed. He, as many Jews after the Holocaust, questioned the existence of God, or of a good God. God had not kept his promise. In 1997 as the Jewish High Holy Days were about to begin, he wrote a letter to God in the New York Times: "A Prayer for the Days of Awe." It is an extraordinary letter from one who had wrestled with God for a long time. Here are some excerpts:

Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long have we to go on being angry?

More than 50 years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many things have happened, good and less good, to those who survived it. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was recreated....Gratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts.

What about my faith in you, Master of the Universe? I now realize that I never lost it, not even there during the darkest hours of my life. I don't know why I kept on whispering my daily prayers, and those one reserved

for the Sabbath... but I did recite them, often with my father...and with hundreds of others at Auschwitz.

In my testimony I have written burning words, harsh words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today. But I felt them then....Where were you, God of kindness at Auschwitz?...Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?

As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again...let us make up. Master of the Universe. In spite of everything. Yes, in spite. Let's make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long.<sup>1</sup>

We wrestle with God, with life, with self, but God will not let us go. In the darkest of nights God has blessed us. In God's darkest nights, God has blessed us.

The next day Jacob walked on to meet his brother. Esau saw him limping toward him. He watched Jacob bow down 7 times in humility (Was this the first time ever, this humility?) Seeing him, Esau ran to meet him, grabbed him around the neck and kissed him. Inexplicable grace.

Esau wept to be holding his brother again. Jacob said, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." Then Jacob wept.



I think of the Table of the Lord in God's darkest of nights. Here we see the face of God. It is the face of suffering love, and it is the face of grace. And here we receive a blessing we need not to deserve. It flows freely from the heart of God.

We come limping. And Christ, serving us bread and wine and says,  
"Welcome home."

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1. "A Prayer for the Days of Awe." N.Y. Times, Oct. 2, 1997.