

Wrestling With God
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(Genesis 32:24-30 NRSV) 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, 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."

When I began talking about a Sabbatical, I went with one intention — having some time off to recharge my batteries and enjoy my family — that was it — the things that I did along the way were to help facilitate that process. But, as time drew closer, as July came and went, and I began taking pictures of churches — as I took Jessica down to Butler University, to begin a new chapter in her life — as I boarded a plane, heading in many ways HOME, but going without my family for a month in Israel — I realized that there was another agenda for my Sabbatical, and no matter how hard I tried to avoid it, no matter how hard I tried to deny it, I had to deal with it.

I don't know about you, but the time went really fast. When I walked out the door on July 16th, I never doubted that I would be back — but as time went on, especially as I boarded that trans-Atlantic flight to Tel Aviv I began to wonder. Could I come back and serve as your pastor and still have integrity in my faith journey. I came to understand that I had some wrestling to do.

Do you remember Rebekah in the Bible? Twins were in her womb, and, according to the Hebrew text, they were crushing and pressing against one another, tangled up together and fighting for room in the close quarters of her womb.

Rebecca is rather unhappy about this fighting that is going on inside of her and she takes her struggle to God and we are told that she asks God "why?" Why this conflict that is going on within her womb.

And the text tells us:

(Genesis 25:23 NRSV) And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your

womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

The story goes on

(Genesis 25:24-26 NRSV) When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. {25} The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. {26} Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.

Jacob, in Hebrew *Ya'akob*, means "supplanter." It was the perfect name for him, as it spoke of his tendency to want to get ahead, to try and turn the tables and change the outcomes — so that the smaller could become the greater, the younger could gain the privilege of the older, the one with little could get a lot.

You remember Jacob's story, don't you?

Jacob was always trying to get ahead of his older brother Esau.

I want to look at a couple of stories.

The first story finds Esau hungry, so hungry that he thinks he might die, and he begs Jacob to give him some of the stew that he was cooking. Jacob, sensing the opportunity, says "sure, I'll give you some food, but first give me your birthright", — the eldest male child was given a double portion of the inheritance.

Esau responds by saying: "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

Jacob, the supplanter, the heel grabber, steals his brother's birthright for a bowl of stew.

The second story is even more deceitful.

Jacob and Rebecca conceive a plan to trick old, blind Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob, when it should have gone to Esau.

The tale is marvelous as the author tells us of this deceitful deed.

Esau when he finds out what has happened is, well, a little upset at his brother stealing Isaac's blessing, and we are told that Jacob the deceiver flees.

In chapter 28 of the book of Genesis we find Jacob on the run from an angry and murderous Esau. On his way to his uncle's home in Haran he lies down and dreams a remarkable dream. In his dream the Lord is poised atop a ladder, or a stairway, and from this place the Lord makes a promise to Jacob:

(Genesis 28:13-15 NRSV) And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; {14} and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. {15} Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

I am with you, God says. I will protect you wherever you go. I will bring you back. I will not leave you. At the heart of these promises is the promise of presence and protection. God commits Godself unconditionally to *be with* Jacob.

As far as we know, this is Jacob's first encounter with God. And the interesting thing is that the promises, by themselves, are not enough. Jacob wants proof. Jacob wants to know that God will deliver.

So, when he wakes from his dream, Jacob makes a vow:

(Genesis 28:20-21 NRSV) "***If*** God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, ***then*** the LORD shall be my God,

God's promises to Jacob were unconditional, Jacob lays conditions. Jacob is concerned for his survival, for his safety, and for his well being.

How much like Jacob are you and I?

Jacob goes to live with his uncle Laban, who turns the tables on Jacob and tricks him into marrying his eldest daughter Leah instead of the woman he had fallen in love with — Rachel.

After all kinds of twists and turns, the time comes for Jacob to return home. It is here that our story really begins.

Jacob realizes that to move forward in his relationship with Esau, indeed to return to relationship with Esau, they must meet face to face. However. Jacob fears for his life because of the hurt that he caused. Jacob remembers well that he wronged Esau, and expects trouble when they meet. For this reason he devises a plan to placate Esau, he believes that the way to re-connect with Esau is through bribery. Hoping that by giving Esau gifts, he can cover the pain of the past. So Jacob sent send messengers ahead leading behind them

extravagant gifts of goats, sheep, camels, bulls, and donkeys, 550 heads of livestock in all.

But before that can happen, Jacob encounters God and learns what it really means to see the face of God — to engage, to wrestle, in authentic relationship with another.

After Jacob has sent his possessions and his family — everything that he owns; to the other side of the Jabbok — and he is utterly alone. We read this remarkable story.

We read in Genesis 32:24-32:

(Genesis 32:23-32 NRSV) 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. {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, 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 Penuel, 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.

This encounter is a turning point in Jacob's life. When Jacob wrestles—truly wrestles — with God — He receives a new name, and with that new name, he is transformed. He is, as Paul writes in Galatians "a new creation".

The word to wrestle in Hebrew comes from a root that has to do with "dust" and "dirt." In the ancient world, folks didn't wrestle in fancy rings. They wrestled in the dirt.

Now, most of us have an awful lot of theology that puts God way up high in the clouds, up on a throne, — dispensing judgment, making decisions — we pray to a God who, many times, feels very far away.

We speak of a God who is transcendent — beyond the place where we are, holding court in heaven while we are way down here on earth. That is why Jacob's dream at Bethel is so important.

In God's first encounter with Jacob, God's first revelation to Jacob, God stood poised at the top of a ladder, or a staircase.

Now we all know what the purpose of a ladder is — to help us climb up to something, or climb down to something. And for many of you, when you hear the story in Genesis 28 the vision that comes to mind, is that which was given to us by the rock group Led Zeppelin as they spoke of a stairway to heaven — a way for us to get up to God.

But in the vision, Jacob sees angels going up and going down. The ladder, or stairway is, in this story, a way down to earth, and carries with it a promise that God will come down to the place where *we* are. God says to Jacob, I am with you, and I will be with you, and I will take care of you—in the place where you are.

So when we hear that Jacob wrestles with a man, with an angel, with God, we realize that God came down, and God came to where Jacob was, even there by himself, by the wadi Jabbok, and God got in the dirt with Jacob.

So—here I want you to put yourself by the river, that place of crossing, of changes, of choices.

Put yourself by the river, place of uncertain futures, of fears and mistakes, in that moment of fear and uncertainty when you have said your prayer. And we each have said,

"I am afraid, God. I am unworthy. God, you promised to be with me. Deliver me. Help me find a way."

And after you have said your prayer and done your best to care for your family, your friends, and all that you are responsible for, you think you are going to sleep, there on the ground, by the river. But you don't sleep. Because someone gets down in the dirt with you, and wrestles with you until the break of dawn.

In that moment when we give it up, and lay down to rest, God comes down to where we are, and maybe we don't always know right away that it is God, but God is there with us, getting dirty and dusty, and God does not let us rest. Instead God grapples with us, engaging us face to face and toe to toe, locking arms with us, trying to pin us down just as we try to pin God down. And neither God nor Jacob "wins".

There's an important point here, because it's not about winning, it's about engaging. It's about the encounter, about being face to face — where you are really willing to be so close that you can smell each other and feel each other, and you learn each other's defenses, each others strengths, weaknesses, and

come to appreciate what it means that there *is* someone else in this world, not just you and your fears—someone real, someone powerful, someone close. And in this realization, when God comes to us in the dirt, we learn to see more than just our own face.

Every encounter is a negotiation, a struggle, even if that struggle is simply to overcome our own recognition that we are not god, and that one day we must die, that we are sometimes blind and limited in our ability to see and do. But God is in the heart of that struggle, and when the mysterious man says to Jacob:

"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

"Israel," which means in Hebrew — *he wrestled with God*.

You and I are Israel too. We, too, wrestle with God, and in that encounter we are able, we are strong, we prevail — not over but with — and we endure, as people in relationship with God and with our fellow humans.

That leaves an important question: What do we make of Jacob's wound? When the "man" sees just how formidable Jacob is in their engagement, the man strikes him on the hip, wrenching the hip so that it is dislocated from the socket.

What is this about?

In the text it tells us that this explains a custom by which Israelites do not eat the sciatic nerve of animals. But there is also a deep theological significance. The wound is to Jacob's hip. He leaves the encounter limping, and we presume from the way the story is told that Jacob/Israel will limp for the rest of his life.

The wound is one that changes the way Israel walks. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, walking is a metaphor for how one chooses to lead one's life. Enoch and Noah walk with God, meaning they are righteous. In Genesis 17:1 God instructs Abraham to "walk in my ways and be blameless."

The way one walks is the way one lives one's life.

In their wrestling encounter, God has wounded Jacob in a way that changes forever how he will walk—how he will conduct his life, and it changes every encounter that he will have in the future.

When we wrestle with God, we too are changed and transformed — God takes some of our comfort zones and tears them out of whack. When we wrestle with

God, we no longer see the world the same way, because we have gotten down into the dirt and have seen the face of God. And we realize that we see God's face in the face of another.

And that brings us back to Esau.

For when Jacob leaves this place by the river, a place that he names "face of God," or Peniel, and he walks on, limping, his brother Esau comes to meet him. Jacob goes ahead of his family, and approaches Esau as his servant, bowing to the ground seven times, a number that is symbolic and represents totality or completion.

This is the moment Jacob had feared, for himself and for his family.

What happens?

- Does Esau strike him down?
- Take his children hostage?

NO, Esau embraces him, falls on his neck, and kisses him. They both cry. Esau asks about Jacob's family, and asks what Jacob was thinking with all those gifts Jacob sent ahead. Jacob is honest, and says that he had hoped to gain "my lord's" favor. Esau gently refuses the gifts—I have enough, let what is yours remain yours. Jacob protests, wanting Esau to keep the gifts he has offered, and now he says the words that are the key to the whole story: **"seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."**

There is a lesson here. Jacob was transformed in his encounter with God, in his long night of wrestling. He stopped seeking advantage for himself, stopped trying to come out ahead or on top, and chose instead to see the face of his brother, even the face of the one he thought was his enemy. When he was able to see the face of the Other, he could offer from his bounty not for the purpose of bribery, or for his own advantage, but for his brother's true benefit, and he could offer himself as a servant. On the heels of struggle, the brothers reconciled, they wept together, and they departed in peace.

I too, have wrestled with God.

I too, have seen God — Face to Face.

And I hope, that I will recognize the limp that God has given me.

Next week, I am going to try and share with you the God that I have come to know, and I am going to try and help you to truly wrestle with God.