

“Wrestling with the Almighty”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Genesis 32:22-31

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

With this lesson, we come to the end of the triptych of Jacob’s life. It began with his dreamworld meeting of heaven and earth at Beth-el, continued with his falling in love with Rachel and his dealings with Laban, and now ends in a confrontation in the dark of night at Peniel. Going forward, Jacob will be in the background, as others’ stories come to the fore in the remainder of Genesis. But this incident will define all that follows, for Jacob, his family, his descendants, and all people of Jewish or Christian faith. For it is here that we confront the reality of the life of faith, the struggle that is at the core of the religious life.

Yes, we can lose ourselves in the details of this story; in its brevity, it is masterful. Much is left to the imagination, and that draws us in: the solitude, the setting, the action all help us to appreciate the shape of this piece of Scripture. This story is indeed one of the most famous in all the Bible, and it is often taken alone—that, of course, is a mistake. It is part of something larger, and that context adds to the power of what we read.

Remember why Jacob was traveling to the East in the first place, why he had left Canaan: he was fleeing his older brother’s wrath. Esau had been enraged by Jacob’s trickery and cheating, and he had murder on his mind. Jacob was rightly scared, and so he fled.

That led him to an adventure of at least a decade-and-a half’s duration, one that unfolded in a distant, ancestral land, a place that could never be home even if it was the source of

his roots. Haran provided Jacob with wives, children, and wealth, but the specter of the past was always present. So, too, was the promise of God.

Jacob had done all he could do in the old country—it was time to return home, even if there was to be a reckoning. And so, he headed back to Canaan to face the proverbial music. There would be no avoiding Esau, or any of the other shades from his past. Jacob would have to wrestle with each and every one of them.

In the verses prior to today's lesson, Jacob learns of Esau's approach. Fearing the inevitable confrontation, he seeks to mollify his older brother. He sends ahead gifts, an offering, a bribe perhaps. Then, recognizing that may not be enough, Jacob sends his family to safety, along with his herds and all his belongings. Alone on one side of the river Jabbok, his family having crossed over, he finds himself with no one and nothing by his side. He is as he was at the beginning of this saga. It is as if Jacob knew he would have to strip himself of everything, his defenses, his distractions, if he was going to be able to face his past. All has been made ready. He is prepared to meet his brother. But first he must contend with a stranger in the night.

Who was this stranger? Was it an angel? A numen or water-demon? Esau? God himself? The honest answer is we do not know, we cannot know. Depending on how one reads this passage and one's willingness to entertain supernatural phenomena, this encounter takes place between Jacob and some kind of heavenly being, his feared brother, or perhaps in his head.

Frankly, I believe that a faithful reading of the text means we need to discount the latter two possibilities. If Jacob had wrestled with his brother, then the text would have said so. Further, the notion that Esau, a skilled hunter who was traveling with a large entourage, would detach himself, cross a river, and seek out a fight on his own makes no sense to me.

And what of all this taking place in Jacob's head? Well, that seems too 21st-century, doesn't it? The problem is that the discipline of psychology as we know it didn't exist 2,700 years ago. We can look at our current experience and argue that Jacob must have been undergoing inner conflict, but to say that an ancient text's authors would depict this struggle as a psychodrama seems to be a case of projection, of laying our biases and interpretive preferences on the past.

So, that leaves us with the other possibility, that Jacob's struggle was with a heavenly being. I do not believe we can know with certainty whether this figure was an angel or God himself. We know, however, that Jacob believed he had wrestled with God. And what we also need to know is that the nighttime fight left Jacob a changed man.

This is the point of the story. This is what we, along with generations of the faithful, have been meant to learn, to grapple with. Meeting God, or entering into his presence, is not an easy thing to do. Nor should it be. God is beyond us, bigger than us. Yet he somehow makes himself accessible to us, even when, especially when, we are broken and flawed.

Jacob was just such a man. Despite all his success in life, he can never escape what he had done. He has cheated his brother, deceived his father, married a woman he did not love. He has been false not only with others, but to some degree with himself, acting as if his misdeeds were of no consequence, or just the price of doing business. But what is a blessing worth when it has been secured under false pretenses? What does a fortune mean if it has been gained through trickery?

Jacob seems to realize these are questions that need to be addressed on the banks of the Jabbok, before he crosses over into Canaan.

Angela Tilby, Canon Emeritus at Christ Church Cathedral and the director of the program I enrolled in at Oxford during my sabbatical, has written, “This passage yields profound insight into our relationship with God. It shows us that God takes us on as we are, but does not leave us unchanged. God struggles with the flaws of our nature; we struggle with the contradictions of our experience.”

We often preach that God loves us as we are, and I believe that to be true. But that does not mean that God does not want us to change. Being broken does not mean one may not be repaired; being lost does not mean we may not be found. But these outcomes require effort, work that sometimes is hard, and much like a struggle.

Commentators about Jacob’s wrestling match with the stranger have made much of how the man seemed to come to a draw with the heavenly one. Did that mean that Jacob was possessed of superhuman strength? That the stranger was weak? Or, perhaps, that God or the messenger allowed Jacob to do as well as he did but no more—remember, the stranger ultimately puts Jacob’s hip joint out of place. We do not know how this was done, but we do know the effect was permanent, as the patriarch was left with a limp.

Encounters with God affect us, and not always in the way we want.

Jacob sought a blessing, and instead he was permanently injured—and given a new name. Only then was he blessed.

You may recall that in the ancient world, the power to name was a great and terrible thing. It was believed that in naming something, someone gained control over it. We might dismiss this belief, but we still hold onto it in some ways, when we give people nicknames or call them something derogatory. We believe that we are defining them.

God, of course, will not be defined by mere mortals. We remember how he told Moses from the burning bush that his name was “I am that I am.” And that’s it. Not “El.” Not “Yahweh.” Just an assertion.

God will not be controlled by you or me. God would not be controlled by a trickster on whom he showered his grace. But he loves you and me, just as he loved Jacob.

Sometimes that love comes through changing us, not by giving us a new hairdo or job, but by forcing us to look deep into our hearts so that we may come to terms with the choices we have made. Jacob did this, and in doing so, he became Israel. He went from the Grappler to the One Who Struggled with God and Men.

Interestingly, though, he did not lose his old name. We see it used interchangeably with the new one in the chapters that follow. The old one is supplanted, but not erased.

This may offer us reassurance when we fear what we might lose in a full engagement with God. We might not want to abandon what we know. The familiar, even if dysfunctional, can be comforting. The good news is that we need not lose our memories of what went on before. However, we hopefully will see our lives with a new perspective.

Canon Tilby adds, “God wants us to be healed, but we need to be humbled. The blessing that Jacob receives is the blessing of integrity. Mysterious though it is, it is our wounds that make us whole.”

Healed and humbled. That describes Jacob after this encounter. Yes, he may have been physically injured, but the spiritual and emotional healing he experienced was far greater and allowed him to proceed with his life, to meet its many coming challenges. And this was true, too, of his humbling. The arrogance that fed his cons and his chicanery was dealt a blow, and that, too, would prove valuable to Jacob in dealing with life’s trials.

Still, even with all that is going on, we see Jacob still making demands in the nighttime encounter. *Give me a blessing. Tell me your name.* Jacob sure has a lot of cheek! But the stranger responds with questions of his own. He does what he will, and only then does he bless Jacob. And he never does reveal his name.

Struggling with God means we will not always get what we anticipate. But I do believe that we will get what we need.

Wrestling is a funny business. We all know that in its “professional” form it is entertainment. But is it an athletic competition? Well, let’s say that’s debatable. What I do know is that my late father was on the wrestling team in college. No boas, no cameras, just the old Greco-Roman way of grappling. After graduation, he was approached by a

promoter about becoming a professional. This was in the early days of pro wrestling, but there was already a whiff of the disreputable about the whole enterprise. Good sense prevailed—my dad declined the opportunity and went on to do other things. But I have to wonder what it was like to be invited to do something so wild.

When we wrestle with God, we are being summoned to do something wild, too, though we may not recognize it. In today's secular world, confessing to encounters with the Almighty is scoffed at. But I believe that each of us has had and will have our moments by the Jabbok, when we will have to make hard, even agonizing decisions. We will wrestle with our consciences, and if we are lucky enough to pay attention, we will realize that we are hearing the still, small voice of God.

God most likely will not knock our hips out of joint, but he may well knock the way we see and interact with the wider world out of kilter. By doing so, he will enable us to see his Creation with new eyes, not as we want it to be, but as it is and should be.

We live in times when it seems as if all Creation is struggling with God on the banks of the Jabbok. Patterns of life have been discombobulated by the coronavirus, and we do not know when things will return to normal, whatever that may be. My hope and my prayer is that when we come through this time, it will be a blessing to us, one that will enable us not only to see things anew but also, led by the Spirit, to live our lives in ways that make clear that we have met God, that we have struggled with what he has shown us, and that we are worthy of being called Children of the Most High.