

Proper 24C: Genesis 32:3-8,22-30
Church of the Good Shepherd
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If you're going to wrestle with God, you might as well put up a good fight.

That's what Jacob did in our first lesson this morning. Everybody who reads about this story seems to have a different opinion of what's going on. But two things are pretty clear—this was a momentous event in Jacob's life, and he wasn't the same afterward.

From the day of his birth, Jacob had been a trickster and an operator, grabbing and scrambling, working the angles to outsmart and outmaneuver those around him. His parents must have had a sense about the kind of guy their second son would become, for when they saw him emerge from the womb, gripping his brother's heel, they named him Jacob, literally "grabby," someone who takes hold of something that's not theirs and claims it for themselves. Jacob more than lived up to the name, supplanting his brother Esau by swindling him out of his rightful inheritance with a bowl of stew. He did the same thing years later with his equally devious father-in-law, Laban, as he jockeyed for economic advantage with the flock of sheep.

But now in this morning's lesson, Jacob's chickens were coming home to roost, for he was heading home now, on a collision course with his estranged brother Esau, and he was scared spitless. Jacob probably expected Esau to be more than a little sore after running off with Esau's inheritance. And when he heard that Esau was heading his way with 400 men, he knew he had to do something.

What he did was typically Jacob—he develops a plan, a cunning way to mollify Esau's anger. Jacob sends a message to his brother, explaining where he has been and what he has become, and makes a peace offering. Then the terrified Jacob divides his family and flocks into two groups in hopes of saving at least half of what he has in the event of his aggrieved brother's attack. He then sends the whole lot across the river Jabbok until it's only Jacob left.

This is where our lesson picks up. Jacob is alone, alone with his thoughts, his fears, his guilt over what went down with Esau all those years ago...and maybe some regret over the years he spent taking advantage of others. And that is when it happens. A Stranger leaps at him out of the dark. He hurls himself at Jacob, and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the blackness of night. It is terrible enough not to see the attacker's face, but his strength is more terrible still. It's clear, this was no normal man.

Some believe the Stranger was an angel, others that he was God taking human form. Still others, taking a more psychological approach, suggest it was Jacob himself, or rather the "Jacob" he had been. I see no reason why it has to be one or the other, an angel or God or a projection of Jacob's guilt—all could be true in a sense. For while there was a real physical conflict happening, what is more critical was the spiritual conflict that was going on at the same time. Jacob was essentially in a battle of wills, a battle against himself, against his past, and against the will of God.

Of course, God could have physically annihilated Jacob with half a thought if he'd wanted to. But Jacob's will would be a bit harder to break. God created us with free will and he allows us to make choices. So we understand that the wrestling match that went on that night was first and foremost about getting Jacob's heart where it needed to be, not about defeating him physically.

All the night through, Jacob and the Stranger struggle in silence until just before morning, when it looks as though a miracle might happen and Jacob might win, the Stranger cries out to be set free. Then, suddenly, all is reversed.

The Stranger merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, dislocating it, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, is that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the Stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win, so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that all the shrewdness, will power, and brute force that he could muster were not enough to win. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.

Jacob hangs on and won't let go of the Stranger until he blesses him. Here is a picture of real, tenacious prayer, like that of the persistent widow in our Gospel lesson. Like the widow, Jacob refused to give in until he got the blessing he wanted. God obviously wanted to bless Jacob. And we assume God could have showed up in some dream, say. But He didn't, because he knew Jacob wasn't ready to receive it, not yet. Before the wrestling match, Jacob knew the value of a blessing, so much so that he had cheated his brother to get a big one from his father Isaac. But unlike his earthly father, God wasn't blind. God looked into the deepest parts of Jacob's heart and saw what he really needed, and what change needed to happen to enable Jacob to receive the blessing. The blessing was not something that could be had by cheating, nor by honest sweat, either. It only came when Jacob was running on empty, but still refused to let go. So, the Stranger asked him his name, and he answered "Jacob," "the supplanter." No, the Stranger replies, from now on you shall be known as "Israel," the one who "strives with God." Jacob realizes then that he's been wrestling with God and survived.

Not only survived, but was blessed. Jacob found his blessing in the struggle, even as it left him wounded. We might even say the blessing somehow *is* the wound, a blessing that leaves a mark. Jacob would forever thereafter walk differently, walk more humbly. Call it poetic justice: the crooked man is wounded and so now walks straight.

This story is, however, about more than just Jacob. It's about all those who will be known by his new name, Israel, and that includes us Christians, the "new branch" grafted on to the "old Israel". As spiritual children of Israel, our inheritance comes also as a people who strive with God, who wrestle with him, who will not let go of God until we receive a blessing. We are a people who know there will be struggle in our walk with God—dark nights, confusion, feeling forsaken. But we know that there is nothing wrong with wrestling with God, because sometimes it's the struggle that gets us to the place where God can change us. It's in the struggle that we find God's blessing. For, as we see with Jacob, blessing isn't always poise and polish, sweetness and light. Sometimes blessing bears the satin scars of struggle, and walks with a discernible limp. We are a people who've been marked by God, and who bear the blessing and wound to prove it.

Now, I suspect that that doesn't sit well with a lot of people, even many Christians. People typically come to church expecting to hear an edifying story, an uplifting thought, a moral lesson--something elevating, obvious, and (frankly) boring. As if our relationship with God were settled and all the rules were clear: be a good person and God will be good to you; flee bad company and rise above adversity; and if you have wild dreams in the middle of the night, please keep them to yourself. That may not be what is preached in the pulpit, but it is often what is heard. It's what we expect, what we want, what we prefer—an assuaging of our anxieties, an assurance of the predictability of our world and of God. Oh, we want to be chosen, sure. We want to be saved, but only gently, please, by gradual degrees, so that we can see where we are going and say, "Yes, this suits me fine. I can handle this. Show me more." You never hear anything about God *causing* the chaos, or even having a role in it. On the contrary, it is God's job, we think, to make it stop. God is supposed to restore order to our lives and help everyone feel comfortable again. Isn't that how you know when God is present? When the danger has been removed?

It is an appealing idea, but unfortunately the Bible will not back it up. In the Bible, much of God's best work takes place in total chaos, with people scared half out of their minds: besides Jacob at the river Jabbok, there's the time when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son; when Joseph was left to die in a hole by his brothers; when Elijah, trembling under his broom tree, pleaded with God to take his life; or when Mary first heard an angel's ambitious plans for plunging her into scandal; when Paul, blinded by his misplaced zeal, lay flat on his belly on the Damascus Road. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was so overcome with fear, he was sweating blood. Perhaps because we know how these stories turn out, we overlook the struggle, the wrestling—the stark terror of being jumped on by an unknown assailant, the collapse of the familiar world, the shattering of dreams, the reduction of everything one has been and done to this frenzied moment of fighting for one's life. We know how these stories turn out, and so we forget that a positive outcome was *anything but certain* to those involved as they were living it.

We have to be honest, being in relationship with God is not for the faint of heart. God is good. As Christians, we know this. But we also know that life is full of chaos, suffering, and injustice. And so following this God, loving him, having faith—if we have any seriousness, any integrity about it—means acknowledging that tension, confronting the disparity between the truth of God's goodness and our experience of life's troubles. We want to know, Where is God when it hurts, hurts so bad you just want to curl up in a ball and die? Where is God when family and friends are angry at you and your life is in a mess? Where is God when your spouse betrays you? When your child breaks your heart? When others lie and speak ill of you and judge you unfairly? Where is God when the wicked and immoral go unpunished, and the innocent suffer? Where is God *then*?

Sometimes these questions lurk in the back of our minds, tainting our thoughts, raising doubt. Other times they charge to the forefront, perhaps in the middle of the night, when we are alone and can no longer hide from ourselves. Where are you, God? Why won't you help? We ask, we yell, we plead, and yet answers don't seem to come. But still we hold on. Something in us won't let go, won't let go of God, of God's promises. So, we hold on. We struggle. We wrestle with our questions, questioning ourselves, questioning God's goodness, God's existence even. But we

can't, won't let go. And then just when we think we're beaten, we find in the desperate wrestling the answer to our prayers. Indeed, the wrestling is the answer. In refusing to let go of God, we discover God who refuses to let go of *us*. God is holding on to us, even more tightly than we are to Him.

The story of Jacob at the river Jabbok challenges the view that sees life with God as safe, settled and predictable. It shows that view to be a superficial faith, paper-thin, and easily crumpled when tragedy and hardship strike. Faith isn't about finding peace amidst the storm, or about having all the right answers, or never having doubt. Faith, *real* faith, *living* faith, is rather the stubborn refusal to let God off the hook, the refusal to let go of God, the determination to wrestle with God, even as God wrestles with us. Make no mistake, it's never fun, this wrestling. It's exhausting, consuming, painful, often deeply so. But just because something is painful, doesn't mean it is not of God. As Jacob shows us, often the blessing comes with the pain. Thanks be to God.