



“Wrestling with God”
Scripture – Genesis 32:22-32
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 6, 2017

Have you ever found yourself awake at 3:00 a.m. unable to return to sleep because of your anxieties or fears? Do you try to figure out your dilemma on your own, searching for a breakthrough by yourself, or do you bring God into the equation?

Most of us can recall critical junctures that changed our lives for good or ill.

This morning we consider an ancient story that has echoed down through the centuries. It tells of a turning point in the life of Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah. It is a story of favoritism, jealousy, dishonesty, scheming, and revenge. It is perfect material for a Shakespearian tragedy or, these days, a typical week in Washington, D.C.

Jacob and his brother Esau were twins. Esau was the first-born son, but Jacob was a close second. The tale surrounding their birth claimed that Jacob and Esau struggled with each other in their mother’s womb, and when they were born, Jacob came out clutching Esau’s heel. It was a precursor of the life they would live. Jacob was constantly trying to pull Esau down.

As they grew, it became apparent that Jacob was a shrewd operator. He was continually sizing up situations and calculating how to take advantage of others. Jacob was sly. No doubt he ran ponzi schemes with the neighbors and badgered strangers to buy time shares in condos on the shores of the Mediterranean.

At one point, when Esau was in a state of weakness, Jacob swindled the family inheritance that was the right of the first born. Later, when their father was on his deathbed, Jacob pulled a fast one on both his dad and his brother snatching the father’s blessing that belonged to Esau.

In the ancient world, the blessing of the father was no small thing. It did not mean simply that dad was proud of you and hoped all would go well. It meant you were to carry on that person’s life in your life, and it was a prediction – almost a guarantee – of success. And losing the father’s blessing was like a curse.

When Esau learned that Jacob had robbed him of his father’s blessing, it was more than he could tolerate. He declared that as soon as the days of mourning for his father ended, he would kill Jacob.

He was not speaking metaphorically. He was a hunter and accustomed to taking down game and Jacob had just become fair game. But, hours before his life would have ended, their mother got wind of Esau’s intentions and helped Jacob escape.

Jacob traveled to another land where Laban, his mother's brother, had carved out a prosperous existence. Jacob worked hard for Laban and after seven years, married one of Laban's daughters. He worked another seven for the hand of Laban's second daughter.

After 20 years, Jacob wore out his welcome. True to his character, he pulled a shrewd deal on his uncle Laban, and Laban's sons organized a posse.

This was a crucial turning point for Jacob. He decided to head back home. He obviously needed to leave, but why home? Wasn't the danger there equally as great?

We cannot be certain why, but home can exert a mighty pull on anyone.

Contemporary writer Mark Remy tells of returning to his small hometown in Ohio after 20 years. Like Jacob, he felt the need to venture back home to resolve personal issues that haunted him. He wanted to explore how the place he grew up had shaped him and to measure how much he had grown in the intervening two decades. One of the chief characteristics he had acquired was courage. Now, when he comes to a fork in the road, he knows he can choose the more challenging route over the safer one.

He had lived with a heaviness for many years and he sought to free himself from it. He said, "I was like a guy tunneling out of prison with a spoon. The work was quiet and painfully incremental, but each day I inched a little closer to freedom."¹

That may well describe Jacob's feelings. After stealing their father's blessing, he was on top of the world.

In the first few years after seizing the blessing, Jacob pumped himself up with false bravado. He and his twin had always competed with one another, and in the end, he had won. Esau would need to learn how to live with defeat. But Esau's vow to kill him rang in his ears and became more agonizing with time.

However, as time passed, the thrill of victory waned and his concern for his brother swelled. So Jacob gathered his wives, his children, his livestock, and all of his possessions and began the trek home. That is where this morning's scripture picks up.

After many days, he reached the Jabbok River, a major tributary of the Jordan River that flows from modern day, Amman, westward. Crossing the Jabbok meant stepping into Esau's territory. But in this story, it also serves as a metaphor representing the threshold Jacob must cross.

At a ford, Jacob sends his entire entourage across the river ahead of him. He does not make the crossing. He is not yet ready mentally or spiritually to take this step.

That night, alone, he ponders his fate. What will happen the next day? Has Esau's temper cooled with the passage of time or has it built to epic proportions as Esau has stewed over all that he lost? After 20 years of reflecting about the way he double-crossed his brother, Jacob is exhausted. When he was young, he boasted of his successful swindling, but over the years, guilt seeped in as he realized how shameful it was to bilk his brother.

Late that night, his energy sapped, his brain overworked and his spirit weary, he collapses into a deep sleep. Guilt over what he did to Esau and fear of what Esau may do to him intertwine. Then, a man appears from nowhere and begins to wrestle with him. Is it a dream?

Have you ever had a troubled sleep where fear startled you awake? Have you lost sleep because you could not rid your conscience of feeling guilty for the harm you caused?

Who is this mighty man that Jacob cannot defeat? Is it a stand-in for God?

The wrestling is prolonged, it continues to daybreak. And when the man did not prevail against Jacob, he struck Jacob's hip knocking it out of joint. Jacob writhed in agony, but did not loosen his grip on the man.

"Let me go," the man screamed.

Through clenched teeth, Jacob shouted back, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

So the man asked, "What is your name?"

"It is Jacob," came the reply.

Then, the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God."

In Hebrew, the word "El" (e-l) means "God." The word "Isra" means to strive or to wrestle. Thus, Israel means "to strive or wrestle with God."

One of the chief ways we draw closer to God is through adversity. That is not to say that everyone draws closer to God through life's harsh blows. Suffering compels many to give up on God. They held to a child-like faith and thought they could strike a bargain with God. They thought: "If I declare my belief in you, I will be spared suffering." Then, when disaster struck, they forfeited their wrestling match with God. They severed ties with the Divine. At least they cut the bond from their side. God never stops urging people to come back.

For those not hell-bent on blocking God out, the pain that we experience through loss or disaster can deepen our faith and mature us mentally and spiritually. But it doesn't come easily. It usually involves strenuous wrestling.

The same is true for the anguish that results from a bad decision. It is not enough that life hurls harsh winds our way, we add to our troubles by making poor choices. Some marry the wrong person and life turns sour. Some lose control of their anger and are cruel to a loved one. Some live under the spell of greed and their unscrupulous actions leave wreckage in their wake. Some compensate for weak egos by trampling others.

This may have been the driving force for Jacob. He was so plotting in his dealings with others because he was constantly trying to prove himself.

However, when Jacob found himself in a situation beyond his control and he feared for his life, his heart and mind became fertile grounds for change. Holding onto God was not easy, it strained every fiber in his body, but Jacob would not leave the struggle until he was blessed by it.

Sometimes when we wrestle with God, it feels as if we are being destroyed. Perhaps it is because we need to let go of certain ideas and ways of doing things so that something new can be born in us.

The wrestling match radically changed Jacob. Before grappling with God, his modus operandi was swindling. But, after wrestling with God, his conniving mind gave way to a kind heart. He finally came to grips with the darkness within himself and released it so that God could create him anew. He limped across the Jabbok River to confront his past and to make amends.

Most of the time we resist admitting that we are wrong and we can be stubbornly resistant to change. But when we are stuck, when we are afraid, when the status quo is destroying us and those around us, we need to let go of where we are and consider the new place we ought to be.

But what of his brother Esau? Simply because Jacob had undergone a conversion did not insure that Esau had drained off one ounce of bitterness. No doubt Esau had dreamt of revenge. Over the ensuing 20 years, his fury may have mushroomed into savagery. He may have viewed the encounter with Jacob as his long-awaited opportunity to even the score.

However, at some point in the intervening years, Esau also crossed a threshold. Perhaps he, too, wrestled with God. Perhaps his bout with the Divine was not a one-night event. Maybe his match was an on-again, off-again affair that consumed his mind for years.

After white supremacist, Dylan Roof, murdered nine African Americans during their Bible study, some of the families of the victims publicly forgave him within days of the atrocity. Others struggled much longer.

When you have been seriously hurt, forgiveness is not natural. Getting even is natural. An eye for an eye sounds much more satisfying. When Jacob finally crossed the river, Esau approached him with four hundred men. But Jacob did not run. Instead he bowed down before his brother in an act of humility.

Esau marched toward Jacob, and when he reached him, he towered over him. Esau raised his muscular arms and Jacob's heart began to pound. And that is when Esau embraced his brother and kissed him. And the two wept in each other's arms. It seems that Esau had undergone his own wrestling match with God, and he had come to realize that he needed to reconcile with his brother.

Theologian Lewis Smedes wrote, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you."

When our lives are in turmoil, we may need to step into the ring to grapple with the things that haunt us. Should you find yourself wrestling with God, do not let go, because it is in striving with God that you will discover a blessing.

NOTES

1. Mary Remy, "Running Home," *Runner's World*, June 2017, p. 95.
2. Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), p.49.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Susan D. Moseley

Eternal God, you are the cathedral of love, inviting us to enter and rest in the sacred space of your being. You are the divine urge sending us out beyond the safety of the sanctuary into the world to know you – in and through our own becoming. But oh how often we fight your urging.

Holy God, we thank you for not letting us go, for not giving us over to whatever it is within us that struggles against you. Like our ancestor Jacob we seem to have so much. We have material wealth; we have family and friends; we have memories and we have plans. Yet also like Jacob, we carry hidden regrets, deep fears, and urgent uncertainties. Forgive us for wanting simple answers more than divine blessing. As we gather at your table today, may we encounter you anew, our Loving Challenger, even if it means leaving with limp.

Loving God, we hold in our hearts and before you all who are experiencing the stresses and heartaches of life's changes: those in mourning...those who are ill...those who are alone...those who are bone-weary.

We also share the joy and offer thanksgiving alongside those who are braving new adventures...those who are welcoming new life...those who are affirming love...those who are striving with others toward justice.

Living God, in all of life, in all of our travels, in all of our doubts, and in all of our endeavors, we are eternally grateful that, above all else, you never leave us.

And now O God, with joyful hearts, we prepare to receive these gifts of bread and wine, and we give thanks for who we are and who we are becoming. We break and share this bread, as Jesus broke and shared it, mindful of your presence with us and our bonding with all people. May others see in us the spirit of forgiveness, gratitude, and generous self-giving that we have seen in Jesus.

In his spirit let us pray together his prayer...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.