

Wrestling with Jacob

August 2011

Genesis 32:22-31 (one night, by the river Jabbok, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious night visitor and comes away with a blessing and a new identity)

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel...these are the ancient ancestors of the faith of Israel. These first three generations of families followed the call of God to be a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. But the devil is in the details, here as elsewhere, and the particulars in the lives of these founders are bedeviled and just, well, complicated. The story this morning from Genesis, by itself, makes Jacob seem noble enough and worthy of future generation's esteem. But the back story puts the wrestling at the river in context.

While still in Rebekah's womb, Jacob struggled with his twin, Esau. They competed from the beginning. "The [twin] children struggled within her," the text says (Genesis 25:22). Esau emerged first, but Jacob was holding on to Esau's heel. The very name Jacob means "grabber." And their birth was only the beginning of Jacob's grabbing. Mother favored Jacob. Father favored Esau. When the twins were young men, Jacob duped Esau who forfeited his birthright for a bowl of Jacob's stew. While their father Isaac lay dying, Jacob duped the old man into giving him, and not Esau, the family inheritance. Esau vowed to kill Jacob because of it, so Jacob has been on the run, on the lam for many years. Now, he is finally, though fearfully coming home. Tomorrow Jacob will stand face to face with the brother after whom he has been grabbing from before their birth. Will Esau receive him, forgive him and welcome reconciliation, or will Esau kill him? Esau was the rough hunter, after all, and Jacob the smooth gardener. Who would blame Esau for rejecting this attempt to reconcile? Who would blame Esau for wanting to kill his trickster, grabber brother? What might Jacob be up to this time?

The Jabbok river is a major tributary of the Jordan, flowing into it from the northeast. Today it is called the blue river. Jacob camps on its banks, across the his brother's territory. Jacob sends his children, wives, sheep, rams, and donkey ahead of him as a peace offering. Always the clever one, maybe Jacob is just testing the waters, and if this advance party is turned away or

harm, he can rethink the reunion idea and hightail it away. But now it is night. Jacob sets up camp on the edge of nowhere and home. (I read of a recent Christian festival where there were signs that said "God is nowhere." Which could be divided to read "God is now here" or "God is nowhere.") Jacob is all alone on the bank of the Jabbok river. God could be nowhere for poor Jacob. But it turns out "God is now here." Jacob is assaulted in the night by a dark stranger. We have come to call this mysterious night visitor an angel or messenger from God, but Genesis just calls him a man. Some have wanted to say the man was more demon than angel. But the text leaves the mysterious stranger's identity an open question. Perhaps it does so because the real question here is Jacob's identity. Who is this twin brother of Esau? Is he the grabber he has always been or is he a brother with a contrite heart, genuinely longing for a renewed relationship with his oft-wronged sibling?

The story says the man wrestled with Jacob all night. We don't have many details. It is dark, ambiguous. We all know what a long night of not sleeping can be. It seems interminable. Will the dawn ever come? There was no TV or library to turn to here on the banks of Jabbok. Just wrestling. Wrestling with a formidable foe all night long. Genesis does not tell us too much and allows us to speculate: Was this wrestling in Jacob's head? After all the dirty tricks over the years to get ahead of his twin brother, was Jacob finally wrestling with his conscience? Is he wrestling with himself or maybe rehearsing the latest installment of wrestling with Esau? Are they locked in fraternal conflict here on the edge of the dark river as they were first locked in struggle in the dark waters of their mother's womb? Or could this be a satanic visitation, a foe of God who is contending with God's man here at water's edge, here at the edge of a possible moment of personal transformation and brotherly reunion? By the end of the night, Jacob is convinced that he has been wrestling with God.

On the way to meet his brother, Jacob is jumped by God. But not the gracious God of daylight who just appears with a word of peace and blessing. This God is a holy terror, a contentious force of the night, a supernatural power unaffected by pious phrases or flowery words or warm fuzzy feelings in quiet places in the heart. This is a God to be reckoned with. A God to fight with. A God who will dislocate your joints and cripple you as you struggle with one another. The fight lasted all night. Near dawn, gasping

for air, spent by the long conflict, the assailant pleads, "Let me go, day is breaking." (Some have wondered about the vampire-like implication of this. The night visitor must leave before the sun's rays weaken or kill him.)

The man says, "Let me go. We'll call it a draw." (Monty Python fans will recognize the Black Knight here.) But Jacob will not let go. Always one to do anything for a blessing, he announces his terms: "Bless me first." The stranger asks, "Well, what's your name?" When Jacob tells him, the stranger shoots back, "You are no longer Jacob. You are Israel. You have struggled with God and people and have prevailed. Israel, you win." When Jacob now Israel asks the stranger his name, he does not get an answer, but he does get the blessing he demanded. And Jacob Israel names the place "the face of God" because here he came face to face with the God from whom he had been running, the God of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham.

This is a long way around to get to the point of how Israel got its name. It reminds me of an old Roy Rogers movie with a terribly complex back-story-legend, telling us how the King of the Cowboys got his trusty Palomino, Trigger. (There were fist fights and gun fights and jail time and breakouts and deals and broken promises and you name it, but the fact of the matter was that Roy just went out and bought the horse one day.) But the story isn't just about a name. Perhaps it is about the ways God meets us and changes us.

When I say the word "faith" what comes to mind? "The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen," as in Hebrews? A matter of trust, as in Martin Luther, or the "Peaceful, Easy Feeling" of the Eagles? Faith can be a slippery thing that does not so much have its feet on the ground. It can be the most vague of theological concepts, and yet it is the most central to our ...faith. The Jacob story offers a corrective here. Whatever happened to Jacob in the night along the Jabbok, it cannot be dismissed as a headtrip. A headtrip won't dislocate your hip. This was not some psychological dark night of the soul. This was a fight, a struggle, a physically exhausting and bodily punishing conflict of two well-matched contenders. A real wrestling match.

I went out for wrestling for a portion of one season, my sophomore year in high school. What a brutal, grueling sport! It takes tremendous conditioning and incredible stamina. WWF on TV gives legitimate wrestling a bad name.

Real wrestlers are in fantastic physical condition. If you have wrestled for five minutes, you know what a challenge wrestling all night would be. That is the image of the encounter with God that Jacob had that night along the river. It is physical, it is grueling, and it ends in a draw.

God meets us this way, the Jacob story would tell us. God comes down to earth, meets us one on one, makes us struggle, and if we keep at it, gives us a blessing.

We pastors are part of the problem, as we often are. We so blithely bless people. We offer a benediction as soon as the last note of the organ fades away, at the drop of a hat. We bless others for sneezing and for doing the least little bit to benefit our ministry. "God bless you," I often say as somebody hands me a check for this or that at church. A visit at hospital bedside or in nursing home or jail concludes with a simple word of "peaceful, easy feeling" blessing. But perhaps the blessings of God are not so easily dispensed, like so many anti-bacterial wipes. Perhaps the encounter with God that ends in the kind of blessing that changes us (or is it the kind of change that blesses us?) ... perhaps this kind of encounter requires struggle, the kind of wrestling Jacob represents.

Most pastors will tell you that death and funerals are more meaningful ministerial experiences than love and weddings. That's because death has a way of jolting our lives into a new kind of attention. Death shocks our systems into vulnerable openness to the possibility of significant change, at least, and often to the necessity of such change. Funerals offer pastors a bit of rare exposure to a "feet on the ground" reality in the lives of people who sometimes use church as a venue for being a little less genuine than in real life, Monday through Saturday. Death and funerals sometimes crack open our hard hearts so that the Word of God that has been sitting there can fall in. Difficult times in our lives makes us struggle, wrestle and fight with foes we did not know we had.

Over the years I have noticed that some people, in Hemingway's phrase, "get stronger in the broken places." Some people drop out of church when there are problems at home or work or in church. That's because they look to church for that "peaceful, easy feeling" or the psycho babble assurance that I'm OK and you're OK. They don't want to be their very real, broken selves in the midst of other people who seem to be unbroken and surreal.

Other people turn to God through their community of faith when the trials of life assail them, because they know that God is in the struggle, in the wrestling, in the conflict that upsets every applecart on easy street.

This is the kind of church where people can be themselves, "broken and poured out," as a communion song has it, "promise of life from death" because "we are the body of Christ." There is another song that says it well:

Gathered here in the mystery of the hour.

Gathered here in one strong body.

Gathered here in the struggle and the power,

Spirit, draw near.

Join the struggle, you Jacobs of Israel. Fight the good fight.

Wrestle and win the blessing of God who is ready to take you on!