

Sermon: Every Step He Takes
Text: Genesis 32:22-32
Date: July 19, 2020
Context: WWPC
Online worship
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Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

Gen. 32:24

My father was not a religious man. It is true that he dutifully went to church with my mom and all of us kids every Sunday. But church -- the hymns, the readings, the sermon, the prayers--all of that was definitely more my mom's thing than his.

My dad would much rather have spent a given hour listening to Paul Harvey than listening even to the great Billy Graham himself.

Which is why it's a little odd that my dad might have brought more insight and understanding to this story than anyone I've ever met, including my Old Testament professors in seminary.

I say this because he experienced an all too real version of this story.

One morning when I was perhaps eight years old, I came downstairs for breakfast and found my dad sitting in the kitchen, looking shell shocked. My mother hovered over him, tending to some fresh cuts and abrasions on his face.

Apparently, he heard some suspicious-sounding activity happening on the grounds of the little mom and pop motel where we lived. And so he went outside to take a look around, equipped only with a large flashlight.

In the thin light of his flashlight, he came around a dark corner and was promptly jumped by an unseen assailant.

Actually in his case, he thought there were four of them, rather than the sole antagonist who wrestled with Jacob.

One other point of difference. My dad's assailants did not bless him before they fled. But, like Jacob, the fight did leave my father wounded, beyond just the superficial cuts and bruises he sustained.

He walked with a figurative limp for the rest of his days, rooted in the effects of a traumatic experience.

No one is really sure why this fight scene is in the Bible. It has confounded scholars, commentators and lay-level readers for centuries.

With good reason. If Jacob's antagonist is indeed God -- and on that point most scholars agree --then it is confounding. Why would God jump Jacob? Why would God leave him wounded in the end?

But for that matter Jacob's whole arc is more than a little confounding. Over the course of six chapters in Genesis, Jacob proves himself to be one of the least sympathetic characters in scripture.

He's a schemer and a cheat. A con man of notorious skill. He hasn't just cheated his brother out of his birthright and his rightful blessing. He deceived his father, too.

His relentless scheming and his chronic deceptions have generated intense conflict within the family.

Just before those tensions explode into a violent confrontation, Jacob flees.

Somehow he prospers, perhaps because in Jacob's first encounter with God, the Divine One inexplicably defies all human standards of justice and fairness, and promises to bless him and make him great.

Sure enough, while Jacob is separated from his birth family he garners two wives and eleven children, and accumulates substantial personal wealth.

The most maddening part of Jacob's story is that, to this point, he suffers no consequences from his deceptions. He gets away with all of them. Just as his selfish choices are about to catch up to him, he runs away scot free.

This story may remind you of another well-known schemer whose prevarications make daily headlines, a man who for whom deception appears to have been a lifelong practice. A man, who, like Jacob, never seems to suffer any consequences.

If this story reminds you of that man -- well, you wouldn't be alone. (Points to self.)

Except, unlike the person you and I might be thinking about, Jacob is now, finally, about to face the music.

After twenty years away, he is finally heading home. We're not sure why he chooses to return. Maybe he feels remorse and wants to finally make things right. Maybe he just misses his loved ones.

Or maybe it's just a literary device--part of the hero's journey--in which the protagonist of the story is forced to leave home, then undertakes a great journey, only to return home again, transformed.

That's easy to believe because Jacob is about to be transformed but not in the way he expects.

His brother has not forgotten Jacob's deceptions, nor has he forgiven them. He is again planning to confront his brother. And this time he's waiting with an army.

But this time Jacob doesn't run. He is prepared to face his brother. But his trickster mind is still fully operational.

He divides his family and household goods into two camps and sends them, separately across the Jabbok, surely in the hope that at least one camp will survive and some of his wealth will be preserved.

So now, as he was on his outward journey, Jacob is once again alone, and vulnerable. And once again God comes to him, only this time not in a dream, with the promise of a blessing.

This time God meets him and is spoiling for a fight.

The text ascribes no motives for this divine assault. All we know is that for the first time in his life, Jacob stands his ground and engages his mysterious assailant.

This episode has no clear moral lesson. It is ambiguous and open-ended. I think deliberately so, to invite each person who hears it and reads it to wrestle with it, to find their own meaning in it.

Perhaps to evoke our own struggles, times we may have been wounded, and to wrestle with those experience and memories until we can find some meaning in them, even if we continue to limp a bit afterward.

Personally I like to revisit the story periodically just to let it undomesticate the Divine One. To remind us that this God whom we love and worship is not a member of our household domestic staff. Not a gardener, as Mary mistook the risen Christ to be.

Not our person assistant, whose job it is -- as I heard a lady in church say one day -- to answer our prayers for a parking space when the lot is full, as if this might be God's job.

The story always reminds me of that wonderful scene from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Susan and Peter and Edmund and Lucy are on the cusp of meeting Aslan for the first time, and they have some questions for Mr. Beaver.

"Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion," said Mr. Beaver.
"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"...

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. [He is a lion.] But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

This God who wrestles with Jacob is not a lion. This God is the power behind the cosmos, the creator of galaxies and nebulae, a power and a force beyond our wildest imaginings.

But to C.S. Lewis's point we know this God is good, because if God weren't good, Jacob would not have lasted even one second, a reality he himself acknowledges that he survived this face to face encounter and lived to tell the tale.

In and through this struggle, Jacob earns a new identity: He is no longer Jacob the schemer; he is Israel, one who has striven with God and with humans, and has prevailed.

In and through this struggle, God's identity is revealed, not as one whose power overwhelms, but as one who blesses.

So much of contemporary thinking and writing about spirituality is focused on how to avoid struggle, so that you can maximize your inner peace and fully realize your personal happiness.

But that's not Jacob's story. My guess is that it's not your story, either.

Jacob spends the whole night in what amounts to hand to hand combat.

Exhausted after this long struggle, his faith, his spirituality, his religion, have seeped down into his aching muscles.

After his sketchy past, full of scheming and deceit, he has fought for a new name, fought for a new identity. And he has won.

He will carry the memory of this struggle deep inside of him.

To paraphrase the famous song by Sting, Jacob will feel this victory in every step he takes. He will be reminded of his new identity, with every move he makes.

And maybe, in the end, that is his greatest blessing.

And maybe it will be yours as well. When God suddenly, unexpectedly, wrestles you to the ground and you refuse to let go until this same God blesses you.

Amen.