

## **Holy Wrestling**

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### **Genesis 32:22-31**

32:22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

32:23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

32:24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

32:25 When 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.

32:26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

32:27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

32:28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

32:29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

32:31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

This story from Genesis is the assigned lectionary for today. It is the story of Jacob, a story that I am drawn to. And I especially love this passage where Jacob wrestles with the Angel. I hope you all had a chance to see the picture at the top of this week's weekly email. It is the original of a print that I have that belonged to my mother and now hangs above the dresser in my bedroom. Many of you may be familiar with the artist, Corita, or Sister Mary Corita as she was known when she did this painting back in 1955. My mother was first introduced to her work when she enrolled my sister in art classes at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles where Sister Mary Corita taught. The colors in this painting, however, are not the usual vibrant palette that Corita is known for, as in the Boston gas tank on Route 93 South. But perhaps

these muted colors are more appropriate for the story that she is depicting which takes place in the dead of night. In the past few weeks and months, I have found myself looking more intently at this picture, searching it for the Angel's face, for Jacob's face, for the Angel's wings. If you look closely you can see foot and a hand. But it is all kind of murky. There was something about this painting that spoke to my mood of late. I confess that since the beginning of the pandemic I have felt somewhat adrift, untethered, a little bit lost. I found myself wandering and wondering in this painting, trying to discern what it meant to wrestle with God. And I was struck by the irony between this painting and what we are going through today. At a time when we are advised to social distance and wear a mask in public, and when I can count on one hand the number of times in the last few months that I have actually touched another living creature, here I am looking at the most intimate of encounters. No six feet apart here. It is skin on skin, human skin to divine skin, faces exposed, mano deo? But I wondered if the struggle in this picture was not representative of the struggle, I find

myself in, and perhaps the struggle that we face as a nation and as a world, and as a planet. I know that I am not alone in feeling afraid, and worried, and overwhelmed, and angry and isolated and lonely, and uncertain, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, or on some days if the dawn will even come. Many of you have expressed similar thoughts and feelings to me. So, I would invite you to examine with me 4 things in this passage today: first the wrestling, then the wounding, then the re-naming of Jacob, and finally the blessing to see how this passage may speak to us today.

Three years ago I preached on another story of Jacob, an earlier passage in Genesis, where Jacob, the second born twin of Esau, has conned his brother out of his birthright and then tricked his father, Isaac, on his deathbed, into giving him, Jacob, the blessing that should have gone to the first born son, Esau. Furious at being cheated not once but twice, Esau threatens to kill Jacob, and on the advice of his mother, Jacob hot foots it out of town to stay with his mother's brother

in Haran. En route he stops to spend the night and during the night has a dream where he sees a ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending. God stands at the bottom of the ladder next to Jacob and blesses him and promises to be with him always.

This story which we heard today takes place 20 years after Jacob's initial flight from home. What precedes this passage is God again appearing to Jacob in a dream, telling him it is time to go home. And so, Jacob sets out with all his possessions, unsure of what his reception will be. He has not seen his brother in 20 years. Jacob has not changed much over the years, he is still wheeling and dealing, but true to God's promise he has prospered. Trying to get a read on the situation, he sends messengers ahead to Esau to tell him that he is coming home, and he has received word back that his brother is coming to meet him with 400 men. That causes some concern; perhaps forgiveness and reconciliation is not in the cards. Jacob sends his wives, his children and all his possessions ahead and spends the night alone. During the

night, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” While the text refers to Jacob’s opponent as a man, in most interpretations that I read, this opponent is God or an angel of God. It is also unclear who the aggressor is. Was it God who waylaid Jacob, or did Jacob tackle God? In one interpretation that I particularly enjoyed, the author speculates that this was indeed an angel of God. Jacob would have been familiar with angels, having seen them in his dreams and heard stories of angelic encounters from his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. He would have recognized an angel when he saw one. The author goes on to suggest that this angel was on a mission, not to wrestle with Jacob, but on his first assignment to speak the traditional morning praise to God at daybreak. Jacob, perhaps feeling insecure in the blessings he had received so far, the one stolen from his brother or the ones he received in dreams, saw this angel passing by. Being a shrewd opportunist, perhaps he figured this was his chance for some extra insurance when he met his brother the next day, and so he grabbed it. And perhaps, just like the first stolen blessing, he thought that this

blessing was his for the taking, that he could win it in a wrestling match, and for a long time he prevails. Now it is almost daybreak, and the angel is going to be late for his assignment. He decides to end the match by dislocating Jacob's hip, another sign that perhaps this opponent is not a mere mortal. And still Jacob holds on. "Let me go", the angel demands. And true to form, Jacob responds with an offer of quid pro quo, "Not until you bless me."

Before acquiescing to Jacob's demand, the angel asks him his name and Jacob answers, Jacob. And the Angel re-names him Israel. And in that moment, Jacob not only receives a new name but a new identity, no longer Jacob, the heel grabber, the second born, but Israel, one who wrestles with God and humans. And still Jacob again seeks an advantage, "And what is your name?" "Why do you ask?" and not waiting for a response, the angel blesses Jacob, and departs.

Now what to make of this passage: the wrestling, the wounding, the re-naming, the blessing. I think we are in the wrestling match of a

lifetime. It's like a perfect storm, we are at the intersection of a global pandemic that is not of our making and over which we have no control and limited knowledge and a social and moral pandemic of our making and over which we are being called to account for our sins. We may be wrestling with God. We may want some assurance from God that we will make it through the night and the days ahead. We are certainly wrestling with each other, struggling to find ways to be in relationship with each other, to find ways to become the more perfect union, to find ways to love and not hate each other. We may also be wrestling with ourselves, struggling with guilt and shame, with our ignorance and complicity. I call this "Holy wrestling," because I think it is a good wrestle, a good wrestle to be in. To wrestle means that we are engaged. There is something we need and want, something we desire, and we are willing to wrestle for it.

And what about that wound? In that single blow to the hip, God/the Angel, reminds Jacob who is in charge, who has the ultimate



power in this relationship. Jacob's skills can take him only so far. And as a daily reminder of that fact, he will always walk with a limp. We too, as creative, inventive and adaptive as we are as a species, ultimately there will always be things beyond our control. But there is a beauty and something redemptive in a wound. I thought of the phrase the "walking wounded." I wondered if all of us as humans are not the walking wounded. I looked up the phrase and found 2 meanings. One from psychology, which refers to an unresolved grief. I am not sure I agree with that meaning. I don't think grief gets resolved. We don't get over grief, we learn to live with it. It gets woven into the fabric of our being. It becomes part of who we are. And sometimes it enables us to more readily recognize and respond to the grief in others. And the second meaning is a medical term. In a triage setting, the walking wounded are the people who are actually able to walk, who have not sustained life-threatening injuries and therefore do not need immediate care. They are actually able to come to the assistance of those whose wound is more serious than theirs. So, this wound of

Jacob's is a reminder of God's power but also a potential portal for compassion.

The re-naming. Our names are important. How else would we know each other? Our name sets us apart from each other; it signifies our unique identity. In re-naming Jacob, God is offering him possibility, a chance to live into a new identity. An opportunity to change, to transform. To give up his old self-serving ways and place his trust in God and allow God to use him, to send him where God needs him to go. Just know that in Genesis it goes back and forth to referring to Jacob as Jacob and Israel. Jacob didn't automatically become this new being after his blessing. He would revert back to old ways even the very next day. Just like we do. Old habits die hard. Old ways of seeing ourselves die hard. Old ways of being are hard to let go of.

The blessing. What is a blessing? Three things about blessings. Barbara Brown Taylor said that to bless someone is not to confer holiness on that person. Holiness is already inherent in all things. And

John Lewis when asked about the way of peace, the way of love, the way of non-violence, said that “in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine....[we] don’t have the right to abuse that spark of the divine in [our] fellow human being[s].” So, when we bless someone or something, we are acknowledging the inherent holiness of that being or thing, that spark of the divine. A second thing about blessings is that contrary to what Jacob thought, they are not to be won or bargained for. They are a gift from God, free of charge, and available to all. And third, they are generative, they are meant to be shared. As our Doxology says, Praise God from whom all blessings flow.... Blessings are meant to flow into us and through us. We are reminded to count our blessings and then pass them on.

Recently, I woke up one morning sometime before dawn. It was still dark outside. I made my usual trip to the bathroom and then climbed back into bed. Usually I can go back to sleep, but not this morning. I lay there and listened. All I could hear was the air

conditioner in the living room and the fan in my bedroom. I finally got up and turned off the air conditioner and the fan. I went to the window in my bedroom that faces NE and opened the window as far as I could. Resting my arms on the sill I pressed my face against the screen. I could feel the cool of the outside air and could see a thin strip of light on the horizon. If I craned my neck to the left, I could just make out a bit of pink on the horizon to the east and through the trees I could see the Morning Star, Venus. I continued to listen. It was totally quiet, not a sound. I waited and listened and waited and listened, and then I heard it. A single chirp. And then another chirp and before too long a chorus of birdsong. And I thought of that angel on the way to sing God's praise at daybreak. And I was reminded of a line from one of my favorite songs,

Oh, Lord  
Please hear my plea  
Send down to me  
Your word on a wing

And for the first time in a long time, I felt hopeful.

These are days of holy wrestling. But like Jacob, we are armed with a wound, a new name and a blessing. A wound that reminds us that God's power exceeds ours and our trust belongs in God, a wound that enables us to see the wounds of others and to comfort them; a new name to live into, full of possibility and promise, and a blessing that we received at the beginning of creation, that we continue to receive and which affirms whose we are and to whom we belong. A blessing that reminds us that God is with us through the dark night and into a new day. A blessing that we are called upon to share. We have much work ahead us to live into God's vision for us but let us, at the very least, begin our work with a blessing. Amen.