

Jacob Wrestled the Angel

Our story this morning is considered by many to be the climax of the Jacob saga and, indeed, it is one of the last stories about Jacob in Genesis before he begins to give center stage to his children. We have followed the story of Jacob since his barren mother, Rebekah, prayed to God for a child and then was troubled by the twins seemingly wrestling in her womb. Jacob has contended with his brother Esau, deceived his father Isaac, and been deceived in turn by his uncle and father-in-law Laban. He has married both of Laban's daughters, Rachel by choice and Leah as a result of Laban's stratagem. And during his years of service to Laban, he has helped his employer build substantial flocks of sheep and goats, great wealth in the world of semi-nomadic herdsmen.

Of course, as you might expect, even this success means trouble for Jacob. When he at last begins to talk to Laban about taking his growing family and his wages and returning to Canaan, Laban is reluctant to let him go. He wants Jacob to keep working for him so that he, Laban, will be the beneficiary of Jacob's hard work. We read in chapter 30 that Laban agrees with Jacob on a severance package, then tries to cheat him out of it. Jacob, for once, manages to outsmart his conniving uncle, although the method he uses sounds more like old wives' tales than solid agricultural practice. Read chapter 30 beginning with verse 25 sometime, look for what Jacob does with the wooden rods and you'll see what I mean. Once Jacob has amassed what he feels is an appropriately large flock for himself, he takes his wives, servants and children and bolts for Canaan. On the way out, Rachel takes it upon herself to steal her father's idols. Before long, Laban and his household are hot on the trail of the absconders. There is a scene of confrontation in Gilead in chapter 31, but Laban has been warned by God in a dream not to take action against Jacob and so they part peacefully, if not amicably. Jacob continues on his way with all his flocks and family. Laban never does get his idols back. Once again, Jacob has been pitted against a family member and come out ahead.

But at the beginning of chapter 32, Jacob has a new problem. To get to his father's encampment at Mamre in Canaan, he is going to have to cross the territory of his brother Esau. Now, you will remember that when the twins were last together, Esau had sworn to kill Jacob. Jacob sends messengers ahead with a friendly overture for his brother, but they report back that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob with 400 men. Jacob is in trouble. His past trickery has caught up to him again.

In hopes of placating his brother, Jacob sends several groups of men and animals down the road, telling the leader of each group to tell Esau that the animals are presents for him from Jacob and that Jacob himself is following close behind to pay his respects. Then, presumably so that if Esau decides to attack him anyway, only he, Jacob, will be in danger, Jacob sends his wives and children and the rest of his flocks away from him as well. Then he settles down at the ford of the river Jabbok to get a good night's sleep before he has to confront his brother.

What follows is another strange and mysterious story from the first book of our Scriptures. It is a story so short on detail that it invites all sorts of speculation and imaginative interpolation. It is clearly significant, yet the ultimate meaning is hard to tease out. It has haunted the imagination of prophets, songwriters and artists for centuries. And there is a message buried in the mystery that has sustained the Jewish nation for millennia and should have an equally deep impact on the Body of Christ, collectively and as individuals, as we understand ourselves to also be the heirs of

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Israel. As we consider this story, we must ask not only, who was Jacob wrestling and to what end, but also, who are we wrestling and what is the impact of our own wrestling as well as Jacob's on us?

For those who are more well-versed in Hebrew than I, there is an immediate hint that this story is significant. As Robert Linthicum writes, "In Hebrew, the word for Jabbok (*ye'aboq*), the word "wrestle" (*ye'abeq*), and the name "Jacob" (*ya'aqob*) are quite similar (particularly when one keeps in mind that written Hebrew had no vowels). Thus, in Hebrew, what the passage is saying is, "Ya'aqob crossed the Ye'aboq, and a man ye'abeq with him"!" It is the linguistic equivalent of a highlighted or italicized passage. It almost demands to be looked at again and carefully. For those who would have heard it in Hebrew, the opening of the story would have surely caused them to consider the very name Jacob; Jacob the supplanter, Jacob the heel-grabber, Jacob the trickster.

And what of this mysterious individual who grapples with Jacob all night long? Genesis says it is a man but there is certainly a sense of mystery here, too. This person comes from out of nowhere and vanishes just as mysteriously. It is certainly no ordinary wrestling match that lasts all night. Nor could an ordinary opponent have put Jacob's hip out of socket with a mere touch, as the Hebrew can be interpreted, rather than as "struck" as our NRSV says. We have seen before in Genesis how a man isn't always necessarily just a man. In the story of Abraham and his three visitors at the oaks of Mamre, the three travelers are generally called men, just as this wrestler is. But when the story is introduced in the Scripture, it says, "The Lord appeared to Abraham," and as the story concludes, one of the visitors is revealed as Yahweh, who tells Abraham of his plan to destroy the evildoers of Sodom and Gomorrah. And when the other two men in the party reach their destination in Sodom, Genesis switches to referring to them as angels. At any rate, Jacob is pretty clearly convinced that his opponent is no ordinary personage, for he demands as a reward for his endurance a blessing from this stranger. One would scarcely think that just anyone could issue a complete stranger a new name, as this person does for Jacob. Heretofore in the Genesis saga, that right has been reserved for God alone. Did Jacob wrestle with Almighty God on the banks of the river that night? It certainly would explain why Jacob's antagonist is able to state so firmly, "you have striven with God and with humans." Again, Jacob seems convinced that he has indeed had another encounter with Yahweh. "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'" God has appeared to Jacob before, remember, at Bethel, so presumably Jacob would recognize the Lord's presence.

But can a mortal man wrestle with Almighty God and live, let alone prevail? As the author of Hebrews wrote, many centuries later, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." For some, the idea seems absurd. Writing of Jacob to remind the people of the Kingdom of Israel of their spiritual heritage, the prophet Hosea said, "He strove with the angel and prevailed..." It is in this way that most of us will remember hearing this story over the years. It is this image that has inspired such great artists as Rembrandt, Gustav Dore, Eugène Delacroix and Paul Gauguin to render the scene. The playwright Tony Kushner refers to the wrestling match between Jacob and an angel in his award-winning *Angels in America*. And it is the angel as Jacob's opponent that inspired the words that I have always remembered for the last 20 years when reading this story. U2's song, "Bullet the Blue Sky," which first appeared on their album,

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The Joshua Tree and which they have played at nearly every concert in the intervening years, contains the line, “Jacob wrestled the angel and the angel was overcome.” I’ll have more to say about that in the context of what this story means to us today in a moment.

But whether we understand Jacob’s opponent to have been a man, an angel, or Yahweh Godself, we must also interpret the meaning of the wrestling for Jacob before we can find a lesson for ourselves here. What was the meaning of this wrestling? One famous Biblical and Talmudic commentator, the 12th century French sage, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, known as “Rashbam,” points out that the wrestling match happens as Jacob is preparing for another confrontation, one with his brother Esau and 400 men. Given Jacob’s track record, one that includes running from Esau once before and running from Laban just earlier, Rashbam concludes that Jacob was planning to run again. “The reason for the angel wrestling with Jacob,” writes modern commentator Rabbi Yossy Goldman, “was so that he would be forced to stand his ground and not escape via a back route. Destiny itself was compelling Jacob to confront the enemy and overcome him. Only then would he witness the fulfillment of God’s promise to protect him from harm.”

It has also been suggested that the wrestling match prepared Jacob in another way to meet his brother. To fully grasp this point, we must remember how Jacob is renamed after the wrestling was done. Jacob is told that he is no longer Jacob the heel-grabber, the supplanter, the trickster, but now he is Israel. Israel is a complicated play on words in Hebrew. The normal meaning would be “God prevails” but Jacob is told that he is Israel “for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” There is also a relation to the same root as the name Sarah, or princess. Israel, then, is one who is a prince in the eyes of God, one who is strong enough to prevail in a wrestling match with the divine. As I said last week, it can do amazing things to a person to know that they are valued by God. The Rev. Dr. Jimmy Allen, a prominent moderate Baptist leader in the South, brings this idea into the context of the meeting with Esau: “in this experience... (Jacob’s) new perspective creates a new purpose. No longer wrapped up only in himself, Jacob limps away from this encounter with a new attitude that makes him relate differently to others. Esau is on the road to him. He’s seen Esau as a man bent on revenge. Now he goes out as a brother and discovers that Esau is a man looking for a brother. He doesn’t need Jacob’s sheep or cows. He needs a brother. When God alters your understanding of who you are, you are lifted to the point you understand yourself as the son and daughter of the King. Something alters in our relationship with others. A new kind of love flows through you. Love begets love.”

Despite the renaming, the man Israel continues to be known primarily in the scriptures as Jacob and his “Jacob” nature continues to have ramifications on his own life and on his descendants. But the primary name for the twelve tribes when they are together is Israel and there is something about the name and the wrestling that continues to characterize the nation throughout the Bible. Kathryn Schifferdecker, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, writes, “Israel is the nation that wrestles with God. She holds on to God fiercely, even when God seems absent or uncaring. Israel holds God to God’s promises because she is the nation that bears the great responsibility of being chosen, and blessed, by God.”

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One final point from the perspective of Israel, the historic nation rather than the man: Henry Knight, a scholar on the meaning and impact of the Holocaust, has written in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* considering the story of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok in the light of Jewish-Christian relationships after Auschwitz. He notices how the figure of Jacob, facing up to the brother whose birthright and name he has stolen, connects with Christians facing up to the shame of the way their own faith has often defined its identity over against the Jewish people, and the awful historical consequences of that. In the wider context, Western Christianity must face a shameful legacy of racism, sexism, and economic oppression. He finds in this story a hopeful paradigm of encounter, repentance (in the sense of a change of direction), and transformation. “According to the story,” Knight writes, “the way forward for the estranged siblings passes through an intense encounter with fear, the past, shame, guilt, and sometimes the threat of violence, as they move toward dialogue and perhaps even toward reconciliation...The way forward is the way of this text: Jacob's journey to the Jabbok and his wrestling through the night.”

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes of the Gentile Christians (us, in other words), that we have been grafted on to the tree that is Israel. We, too, are the heirs of the promises of God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are also the people who must wrestle with God, who must, as Kathryn Schifferdecker wrote, “hold on to God fiercely.” Paul also wrote, in his glorious letter to the Philippians, that we must “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” That sounds to me a lot like wrestling with God. It reminds me that despite what the proponents of the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” might say, a life that takes seriously walking in the way of Christ Jesus is not an easy life. There are, in the words of the grand old hymn, “fightings and fears, within, without.” Life will throw obstacles in our way, with which we must grapple. Sometimes, our opponent will be the worse part of ourselves. Again, the Apostle Paul from Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” This truth is, I think, what inspired Bono to include the image of Jacob and the angel in “Bullet the Blue Sky.” The song is a prophetic message about the presence of evil in the world. Bono reminds us that sometimes the part of us that is still Jacob, the deceiver, wins out over our better angels – “Jacob wrestled the angel and the angel was overcome.” Sometimes, our Jacob-natures seem to rule in our lives more strongly than our Israel-natures.

But we are called not to simply accept the triumph of sin, death and brokenness in our lives. Paul provides the answer to his own anguished question, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Our Loving Creator calls us to come and wrestle. It is through the wrestling with God that we will further our own transformation from Jacob to Israel. It will not be easy for God is not safe or tame. But God is loving and God is faithful.

I read this week a beautiful story by Nathan Aaseng, a Lutheran pastor in Iowa. He tells of reading in a local magazine the story of a wrestling meet between two small town high schools. One school had on their wrestling team a young man with Down's Syndrome. “He was not capable of wrestling at a competitive level,” Aaseng writes, “and posed no challenge at all to any wrestler. But the coaches asked if anyone on the opposing team would at least give the boy a

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chance to get out on the mat. One wrestler offered to take him on. He not only wrestled him for the entire six minutes, but allowed his opponent to beat him on points. He gave the kid the thrill of not only competing, but of raising his arms in victory. Both wrestlers got a standing ovation, and there was hardly a dry eye in the gymnasium.”

“And for the first time,” Aaseng continues, “I understood what that Genesis story of a man wrestling with and prevailing against God was about. The unique message of Christianity is that God is not an impersonal force, or a terrifying presence to whom we cannot relate in any meaningful way. God is not a person who expects only praise and sacrifices and groveling from us and has no further use for us. God is ready and willing and eager to get down and dirty with us. We are the spiritual descendants of Jacob. We are the people who wrestle with God. It is not presumptuous of us to make this claim. God was the one who gave that name to God's people. That's who God *wants* us to be.”

And so, my sisters and my brothers, hear the Good News. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator of the Universe, Yahweh Sabbaoth, so desired loving contact with humankind, that the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us. He taught and he healed and he loved his friends and he gathered with them on the night he was betrayed. And on their behalf and on our behalf, he not only wrestled and allowed himself to be overcome, he accepted a beating and a scourging and the most painful death humans have devised. And on the third day, he rose again and he promised to be with us until the end of all things. God is the love that wrestles with us and will not let us go. God wants us to see God and each other face to face, wants for us to be in communion. And so, we celebrate our communion with each other and with God and we give thanks for Christ Jesus who continues every day to bring us into the family of Israel, God's beloved wrestlers.