

Pastor's Message – 8/6/23  
Genesis 32:22-31

Christianity has often stressed the loving and supportive nature of God, the "gentle Jesus meek and mild" image of our Savior. A favorite hymn of many is the much-loved children's hymn "Jesus Loves Me." Many people have the expectation that religion and faith are what make our life with God easier.

Some pastors and churches promote an imagination-based approach to prayer. "Imagine yourselves in a quiet, peaceful, lovely place," begin the instructions. After we have mentally placed ourselves in some make-believe Eden, then we are invited to meet Jesus and talk to him there. Think "I come to the garden alone."

I'm sure that approach serves some needs. I'm equally sure, however, that it misses the point. Ours is not a God who needs to be consigned to imaginary, happy places. A great, recurring truth of scripture is how he meets us wherever we are. As life is a struggle, so our relationship with God can be a struggle. For every person who zips through life with few problems and are convinced God is the source of such ease, there's all the rest who struggle.

Compare this God of "sweetness and light" to the God Jacob wrestled in the night at Peniel. Jacob's relationship with the divine is not symbolized as beautifully backlit and shining, with an orchestral score swelling in the background. Jacob's relationship finds God in the dark, grappling on a muddy riverbank. The relationship is hard-fought, and it is the turning point of Jacob's entire future, now his reason for living.

As we meet Jacob in our Bible reading from the Book of Genesis today, the great patriarch was not sitting crossed legged on the floor imagining happy places and thinking peaceful thoughts. Neither was he privy to some glorious sanctuary or lovely chapel. He was, rather, anxious and alone, sleepless in the open air of a fretful night. He was haunted by a troubled past that was coming back to meet him. He was caught between an alienated father-in-law to the north and a bitter brother to the south.

We hear today a "thick" story, one with depth of a bodily encounter with God at a "thin place," a place where heaven and earth come together. Everything is at stake here. Jacob's family and future are on the line. The next day will be Jacob's first encounter with his brother Esau since Jacob ("Grabber") had snatched both birthright and blessing from his brother. Since his encounter with God at Bethel, where heaven and earth were joined by a staircase between heaven and earth, we have no record that Jacob had heard anything else from God in the 14 years he had worked on his uncle's sheep farm. Was that experience long ago a promise, or just a dream? And might that dream come to a tragic end the next morning?

Jacob could lose everything, easily. Esau's retinue was nearly a small army that could easily crush Jacob's. And given what Jacob had done to him, Esau would seem to have every reason to kill him and take his family and household as slaves or servants of his own.

No wonder Jacob wrestles all night long. The "Grabber" struggles to find something to grab onto, some hold to keep.

Is Jacob wrestling with his past? Is he wrestling with his future? Esau, Jacob's brother, is more of a hero at this point than Jacob. Esau will turn.

out to be a good man and it is Jacob who is the conniver. Jacob may be wrestling with his past, but perhaps God wanted to get Jacob's attention.

After the whole experience, Jacob calls the place Peniel, "for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." It seems that unless you are Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, you don't stand in the presence of God and live. In his generation, Jacob is the one.

This is what turns Jacob into a patriarch. This is where he becomes a man of faith. It was not the quality of his life that turned him into a patriarch, it was wrestling with God. This is not a morality tale. He did not meet God and suddenly become a good guy and stop doing dirty tricks. But he did have the inner strength or courage to wrestle with his conscience that alone identifies him as someone of or with faith.

Jacob was finally growing up. He'd been a grabber all his life, and some things don't change overnight. After years of estrangement from his brother, he was on his way to seeking reconciliation. He had already sent his family, his servants, and a peace-offering ahead of him. And then he had lain down to sleep.

Jacob tossed and turned all night as he wrestled with an unnamed man. Was the figure a dream – a bearer of his troubled conscience? Perhaps he was an angel sent from God. Some even believe the wrestler was none other than God.

This was a major turning point in Jacob's life, where God begins to be able to use him. The event is marked by a change of name, from Jacob ("grabber") to Israel ("one who strives with divine and human beings").

Like Jacob, we all get into unexpected wrestling matches from time to time. We wrestle with our consciences, we wrestle with ideas, we wrestle with each other, and every so often we wrestle with one who will not tell us his name but who gives us a blessing like none other than we have ever received.

It is by wrestling that we discover who and whose we are. It is by wrestling, years, and years of continuous struggle, holding on till we get this blessing, that we become who we are intended to be.

A number of important spiritual lessons are suggested here. When we have a true encounter with God, we're never the same. Meeting God is a transformational experience, and if we're not a transformed people we're not God's people.

The transformation was certainly evident in Jacob's life. He was given a new name, and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He was a dude with an attitude; now he's a gimp with a limp. But he wobbles into the future with something worth cherishing -- an entirely new outlook.

There's nothing like an injury to serve as a permanent reminder of something. Soldiers who have missing limbs can't very easily put their experiences behind them. Factory workers who have lost fingers or been seriously lacerated by machines will not soon forget that job. Children don't forget the football game that broke their leg, or the bike that they flew from to receive the scar on their chin. Not only do the handicaps of physical injuries provide reminders of the event, but constant questions -- "What happened to your leg? How did you get that scar?" -- are cause for constantly retelling the story, ensuring that you won't forget it anytime soon.

The point of this story is not that pain is good, but that it can transform us in positive ways. God can work through that pain for good. In the course of our discipleship to Jesus and service in his name, we will, all of us, continue to struggle. Sometimes we will struggle with God, either because we do not understand or do not like where the Spirit is leading us.

At other times, we will struggle with other people, or even “spiritual forces of wickedness” and “the evil powers of this world.” But in that struggle, our role as Christians, for we are the “new Israel” is not to grab. It is not to preserve or enhance ourselves, our position, or our reputation. Neither is it to demand blessing from anyone else, but rather to receive and offer blessing as opportunities may come.

In a way, Jacob’s story is also the story of the Christian church in North America at this moment. In what we used to happily call the “mainline” denominations, we struggle with the unknown in the darkness. While some congregations flourish, attendance is down in the majority of churches and grey heads predominate. Finances are slipping. Where the large denominations once had the ear of government leaders, the secular world now ignores these denominations, or – with the exception of a few television shows – portrays them as quaint.

Our members are not of one mind: gay ordinations and gay marriage, women’s rights, peace issues, immigration, the nature of Jesus, the very language we use to address God, the hymns we will or will not sing, appointment system versus call system for pastors, the trust clause or local church ownership – these matters divide us, sometimes even within the same congregation. Like Jacob, we don’t know how to name what is happening to us, we don’t know if we will see tomorrow, and we fear what tomorrow will bring. . .

The long night of change seems endless, and we can’t always discern the way ahead. At times, we seem on the verge of losing all we cherish – even our collective life. Why is God struggling with us, changing us, this way? What is this new identity God is giving us? Will we be able, like Jacob, to walk with our limp, to be reconciled with those we have wronged, and to bless generations to come?

The church’s process of wrestling will probably take three forms, and we are already beginning to see evidence of each. One group will want to work within the system. They will wrestle, but only under the strictest rules of limited engagement and unlimited rounds, and they get to pick the referee. These are the die-hard who believe that somehow they can muddle through and keep everything basically intact, keep their world the same. They are aware of the need for change, but they want it managed, directed, doled out in small non-threatening doses that can be managed and assimilated.

The second group will want to change it all now. They want to leap into the ring and start wrestling with God, provoke an encounter, eager to grapple with the issues of change and resurrection. They are zealous to engage the holy out of their sense of yearning for it for so long and of not having that yearning met for so many decades.

At the same time, they are limited in what they can accomplish because they think the struggle is all about the angel. While they are focused on the church, they are unrealistic about the pace and depth of that change and oblivious to the radical nature of the consequences of the Jacob story for themselves.

They think they are ready for the emerging relationship, but they have not considered that they will have to wrestle with their own identity, their own injury, their own hearing of a new name whispered in their psyche, which is likely to take them places they never imagined (or wanted) to go. In their grappling, they will be amazed to find that some of the blood from the battle is their own, that they cannot emerge unscathed.

The third group will do nothing. They may be unwilling or physically or emotionally unable to wrestle. Many of the older ones will follow it to their graves, comforted by the meaning of the metaphors that have carried them through their entire lives.

Like Jacob heading out for home, we need to know where we have come from, to recognize where we are going – because the North American church is in the process of being transformed. As Christians, we are being given a new identity, one so unfamiliar we may have trouble recognizing ourselves.

But we can learn about new identity, about transformation, from Jacob and the crucial point for the Christian church, hungry in the secular age for good news, is that blessing. It must have been immensely powerful – Jacob knew the moment it was given that it was God who had embraced and wounded and renamed him.

What is the church's blessing today? What is our wound? How can we who live within the church find the strength to hold on to our adversary in the darkness, until we too receive our blessings?

No wonder Jacob wrestles all night long. The “Grabber” struggles to find something to grab onto, some hold to keep.

And true to form, Jacob does not relent in his wrestling, his grabbing of his opponent, even when, at daybreak, his opponent puts his hip out of socket. Jacob seeks to grab a blessing.

The blessing begins as a new name. No longer “Grabber” (Jacob) but “Wrestler-with-God” (Israel).

The blessing begins with the new name, a new identity. Grabber may have survived the night, but perhaps not what lies before him—a period of his life where the nature of his struggle with God will have to change. He will continue to wrestle with God and others, as he had before. But now his “success” will come from giving and releasing more than from grabbing.

Jacob finds God in the dark, grappling on a muddy riverbank. Jacob comes limping away from Peniel knowing something more about a God who cares enough to struggle with him.

Limping onto a new path isn't always pleasant, but with God at our side we know that we are both broken and blessed. Jacob held tightly to the Lord throughout his all-night struggle, and so should we -- this firm grip is the only assurance we have that we are part of a process that is changing us for the better.

Jacob met God, not in a place of peace and quiet but in an on-the-ground, in-the-dirt wrestling match — a sweaty struggle that lasted until dawn. He found God in an unexpected place. God doesn't expect us to come out of our world, out of the difficulties and trials, to find and meet him, but meets us where we are. Jesus is Emanuel: God with us and we may find Him when and where we might least expect. God comes to us. People have looked for God in the expected place. But that's not only a manger; it's not only in Nazareth; it's not only on the cross. The place to find God is in the unexpected places, everywhere and anywhere we are.