

Wrestling with God¹
United Church of Broomfield
August 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31

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 Jab-bok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not triumph against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 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." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have triumphed." 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Pen-ee-el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Pen-u-el, limping because of his hip.

Are you afraid of the dark—or the darkness? Maybe the darkness is in the hospital, or a war zone, or you found yourself jobless or on the edge of bankruptcy. Maybe the darkness is anguish over children, or marital distress. Maybe it is the pit of depression, the fog of anxiety, or the vise grip of addiction. Maybe it's a pandemic like COVID that completely upends your life, causing illness, death, uncertainty and chaos.

Your life seems to be over, or maybe, it's time to begin again. You hoped you could have a new start, but there were clouds of fear, uncertainty, and doubt.

This is the day that Jacob has been anticipating for 20 years. He is going back to the Promised Land, the land of Abraham and Isaac, the land where God's promises will be fulfilled. Yet Jacob is not sure what he will find there. He has no home with his parents. His brother Esau has moved to Edom, which is close enough that Jacob can't avoid seeing him again. They did not part on good terms, if you remember the story. So, Jacob sends messengers to his estranged brother Esau, asking for mercy.

3-6 Then Jacob sent messengers on ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir in Edom. He instructed them: "Tell my master Esau this, 'A message from your servant Jacob: I've been staying with Laban and couldn't get away until now. I've acquired cattle and donkeys and sheep; also men and women servants. I'm telling you all this, my master, hoping for your approval.'" The messengers came back to Jacob and said, "We talked to your brother Esau and he's on his way to meet you. But he has four hundred men with him."

The messengers return, and it doesn't look good. Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men! A flood of memories come back to haunt Jacob: schemes, manipulation, deceit—and a death threat! He has burned his bridges, and he imagines the worst. Desperately, he divides his family and servants into two groups, hoping one might survive.

¹ Folkert, Vic. 2018 March 23.

Then he prays. It is a good prayer: humble, honest, depending upon the promise of God.

9-12 And then Jacob prayed, “God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, God who told me, ‘Go back to your parents’ homeland and I’ll treat you well.’ I don’t deserve all the love and loyalty you’ve shown me. When I left here and crossed the Jordan I only had the clothes on my back, and now look at me—two camps! Save me, please, from the violence of my brother, my angry brother! I’m afraid he’ll come and attack us all, me, the mothers and the children. You yourself said, ‘I will treat you well; I’ll make your descendants like the sands of the sea, far too many to count.’”

He comes up with plan. He sends wave after wave of goodwill gifts—goats, camels, cows, and donkeys—to the brother he has wronged. All of that makes sense; it is the kind of thing any resourceful person might do in a crisis like this.

Then Jacob does something unexpected:

21-25 So his gifts went before him while he settled down for the night in the camp. But during the night he got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He got them safely across the brook along with all his possessions. But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn’t get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob’s hip out of joint.

There, in the darkness, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Who was this “man”? a prophet? an angel representing God? God in human form? Whoever it is, Jacob understood that ultimately, he was wrestling with God.

What does Jacob want from God, as they wrestle all night long? He wants to control him, gain power over him, squeeze out of him a guarantee of safety.

Unless you have done something similar, you can’t understand his desperation and desire: “God—you must come through for me—I need to know that you will fix this problem.” That is what Jacob wants from God.

But—What does God want from Jacob? What does God want from us in our times of struggle?

They wrestle all night, and Jacob cannot overpower God (no surprise there!) But—God could not overpower Jacob! How could that be? This is God in human form (or his representative). What is there that God cannot do?

There is only one thing God WILL not do: overpower the free will of Jacob. God wants Jacob to freely yield to God, who has promised to watch over him. God won’t force Jacob to yield.

Yet God is not passive. God humbles Jacob. God strikes his hip; it is strained, weakened and permanently injured.

God humbles us. It may be a financial setback, a moral failure or a pandemic. It may emotional distress, or betrayal, or loss of control over our situation. It is not that God causes those things; they happen in our world. Yet in times of weakness and distress, we understand that we cannot overcome God. We cannot control all that happens to us, and we cannot control God.

Jacob is humbled, and still, he does not let go! After a long night of trying to get the upper hand, all he can do is hang on to the reality of God being there.

We are invited to wrestle with God, with the truth of who we are, with what it means to be a people of God ... Sometimes, that's all we get: God is still there. Is that enough?

26-29 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have triumphed." 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.

What has changed? Jacob and his family are still in grave danger from Esau's 400 men. Jacob has no more weapons, no more gifts, no more cunning plans than he had before. He does not even come away with any new promises from God, for God has already promised him land, descendants, and his presence and care.

But God has given Jacob a new name. Jacob was a "deceiver": grasping, manipulating, scheming to control people and circumstances. His new name, Israel, celebrates a new beginning: "He struggles with God." He brings his concerns to God, and he trusts God with his future.

Jacob's situation has not changed, but Jacob has changed, for God has given him a new name. With his new name, he has a new future. Many years later, when the descendants of Israel had lost their way and lost their nerve, Isaiah the prophet said to them,

This is what the LORD says--he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3)

Later still, the story took an even more amazing twist, as a descendant of Israel wrestled with God in the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane, finally yielding to his Father:

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:42-44)

Finally, in the ultimate relinquishment of control,

Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

Then God, who is forever faithful to his covenant promises, raised Jesus from the dead!

The answer to our struggles is not that we get control of God, but that we yield our lives to God.

As the sun rises on Jacob, he walks with a limp, because of his hip. He calls the place Peniel, humbly saying "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." And he remembers what God has said to him:

Genesis 32:28 “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have triumphed.”

He has overcome! The danger has not passed, the struggles are not over, and his future is not under his control. COVID is menacingly lingering. Racism continues to plague our nation.

In wrestling with God, Jacob – AND WE - become a new people, with new confidences, and assurances of a glorious future with God.

In the various types of darkness that we encounter, may we wrestle with God, triumph and experience abundant blessing as we yield to God.

Amen.