

“Wrestling and Limping and Blessing, Oh My!”

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. A DARK AND SCARY NIGHT

It was a dark and scary night. Jacob was *not* at the top of his game, by any means. Since we saw him last week, trying to figure out his way in the world as a young man, working for Uncle Laban under somewhat *dubious* circumstances—mixed up wives on the wedding night and all—he has come a long ways.

He is “successful” by anyone’s account: many wives and maids and children in abundance. Many sons, especially! Many flocks and herds and household members of all kinds.

But this night he is *not* the confident, almost-cocky, slightly shifty businessman with an entourage. For he has literally “gotten all of them over the river.” Gotten his two wives, two maidservants, eleven children and every last one of his possessions, safely across the Jabbok River.

And *he* has stayed behind. Why? Because Brother Esau is on his way to find him, and settle their lifelong differences. It might not be pretty! Jacob doesn’t want the womenfolk and children to see this.

He is not feeling confident about this “family reunion,” by any means! He has, in fact, sent out “scouts.” Not friendly messengers to look for the relatives and promise them that fried chicken and potato salad are waiting at the family picnic.

No, they have been sent to scout out the *size* of the band and the mood of the patriarch, Esau. All things are in question since that little “falling out” they had a few years back as young boys over some pottage.

Jacob, as we’ve seen has been a bit of a scoundrel his whole life—it was said he even wrestled with his twin brother in the womb! He’s wheeled and dealt and connived and done some questionable things. But, he’s always managed to come out on top. To command the day. To be on his game.

But not tonight. Tonight, he is in a frightening “in between place.” Fearful. Shaking in his boots. And, he’s alone, in the deep of the night. For, sending off all his wife and children and servants also meant sending off anyone to protect him—from the things that go bump in the night—threatening body and unprotected soul.

II. WRESTLING

Have *you* ever wrestled with God? Or wondered if the One—or situation— you were wrestling with was “of God?” *From* God? Or, more like a demon, instead?

There they were, Jacob and this Being. Was he God? An angel? A man? Was it even a “he?” The story is wrapped in mystery—as it should be—for it’s powerful and provocative that we don’t know all the details.

Put yourself in that scene. Was the night warm and comfortable, or was it damp and cold? Did the man who wrestled with Jacob appear suddenly, as in a dream, or was it more like being suddenly awakened by a bear while camping by a stream?!

Did sweat run down their faces as they tousled in the moonlight? *Was* there any moonlight at all, or was it pitch black, heightening the sense of confusion about this Being, and the meaning of their struggle?

Did the dark and the absence of divine light in the sky undermine Jacob’s sense of being able to get his ground, and keep this fearful encounter under his ever-present sense of being in control?

Was Jacob tossing and turning in his sleep, anxious about tomorrow and the expected meet-up with Big Brother Esau? The one whose birthright he had sneakily stolen all those years ago, and now was reported to be marching toward him “with 400 men!”

Was he fearing for his life? His status? His future? The future of his wife and children and flocks and their well-being?

Do *you* ever toss and turn at night, wrestling with the fears that show up like demons in the wee hours?

And wrestle, like Jacob, till daybreak, wondering who and what this *is* that has you in such a strong grip, that you can't break free? Is it of God? Or something much more sinister?

Have *you* ever wrestled with God?

Or wondered who or what you were wrestling with, anyway?

If you've ever preached a sermon, you know there's plenty of wrestling that goes on! In the night, in the day, in the weeks before. And this is certainly not unique to writing sermons or preaching, but all creativity and producing of art, message, proclamation of the heart and mind.

Even events—say, like the Bazaar! Or a reunion, or Gold Rush Days or....If you've ever been in charge of an event, you know what it is to wrestle in the night. If you've ever faced a surgery or a treatment or a meeting that will determine something about your future.....

If you've ever raised a child, or been part of the concern for the well-being of another human being or animal, you know wrestling in the night. With forces a little dark and mystifying and seemingly out of control.

Jacob's experience of God there, next to the Jabbok, was not of a cuddly, warm, all-loving, still-speaking deity. It had a definite edge to it! “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

We would do well to have a healthy fear and uncertainty about the God we follow. The One who challenges us and calls us to new places and understandings.

III. LIMPING

This God, the One of wrestling in the night and struggle, is better understood as not-so-easy-to-understand; not so quick to grasp. Remember Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia? He was a big, loving though commanding-respect and awe, roaring lion. Not a domesticated, pacified, doormat deity, created in our own image. By any means!

That is the kind of God who Jacob encountered there by that stream. With whom he wrestled all through the late night and into the dawn. The mysterious man-like-but not altogether graspable One who suddenly, near the end of the fight, threw his hip out of joint, so that forever more Jacob would remember this night and that wrestling with God is no light matter. Not a momentary encounter that will ever pretend to leave you unchanged.

When we find ourselves wrestling and limping, we might just need to take a step back and look hard at our understanding of God. At our interacting, our relating; how we come to God in our dark times and how God comes to us.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests part of our limping during and after the struggle, is our “preoccupation with a comforting faith.” Faith *is* meant to comfort, of course, but it also needs to stir up and provoke us.

We can be preoccupied with:

“A comforting faith in a God who will take care of the chaos in our lives, since “it is God's job to make it stop. God is supposed to restore the status quo and help everyone feel *comfortable* again,” even though the Bible will not support this belief.

Taylor says that Jacob is like us, "presenting God with our "conditions for our belief in God," as we "persist in telling God what it means to be with us—to keep us safe, to feed and clothe us, to preserve our lives in peace," while the God of covenant provides a very *different* answer to that prayer, one that involves struggle, and questions that aren't always answered, and yet always a blessing that promises God's presence with us every step of the way.

IV. BLESSING—BERAKAH

And then, *after* the wrestling and the limping, after you have struggled till dawn, and aren't sure where you've gotten to, and your hip is out of its socket....

After the questioning and the challenging and the name changing, *then* comes the blessing. "Berakah" in Hebrew. A beautiful, packed word. The blessing, berakah, comes, but *not* without the struggle. Not, perhaps, without *demanding* it!

Once again, we see something of our most honest selves in Jacob. For, Jacob is *not* lacking for chutzpah!!

"I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

Sometimes we have to be frank with the Divine. Say what's *really* on our mind. Not be afraid to challenge and argue and ask for what we need.

"I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

What does it mean to be *blessed*? In what ways do we need God's blessing, right here, today? How do we need to be opened up and wrestled to the ground, so that we recognize it when we receive it?

I like Bruce Epperly's definition:

"To be blessed is to become *right* with the world and feel at home in our skin. It is to be affirmed and loved just as you are. It is to have a respected person call you beloved and pave the way toward the future."

He adds a question:

"Encountering the Holy One can leave you feeling wounded as *well* as blessed. Jacob wrestles with a nocturnal stranger whom he believes to be God, refuses to give up, and receives both a blessing and a limp.

Where is *our* personal and congregational place of wrestling? What is worth hanging onto for dear life? Where do *you* need God's blessing? What is un-blessed and in need of healing?"

When we are limping, we might find blessings in unexpected places. How does the blessing come? Can you even say?

Sometimes the blessings come from the saints, in the form of encouraging words. From the voices of others, past and present, who have also struggled. In the night; in the dark; with angels and demons alike.

There's a fine line between "pat answers" or trite little religious sayings, and solid inspiration that helps give a new perspective and bolster our resolve.

These treasures of wisdom floated across the radar this week as I contemplated this message. See if you find them uplifting, or give you something to chew on when you are wrestling:

Shannon L. Alder, 21st century

"You will face your greatest opposition when you are closest to your biggest miracle."

Ravi Zacharias, Recapture the Wonder, 20th century

"The world is larger and more beautiful than my little struggle."

"I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being." Hafiz

"When you can't control what's happening, challenge yourself to control the way you *respond* to what's happening. That's where your power is." (unknown)

V. OH MY!

Have you ever wrestled with God? Have you ever grasped and struggled and begged for mercy, but wanted so much to get the upper hand, to demand answers, to the challenges that beset and besiege?

Have you come out limping, but enveloped in blessing?

With a new name, maybe in a new place—a place that has become holy and in need of its own new name, because surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place! And we *knew* it!

²⁸ The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."

²⁷ The man said, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Jacob."

²⁹ Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"

The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.

³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"

When we are shaking in our boots in the dark of the night, unsure of what lies ahead. Unsure of where our protection and comfort are to be found, may we wrestle with courage, changed forever by our encounter with the Holy, limping but stronger into the new day, embracing our new name and identity. "God wrestler" One who has seen the face of God, recognized it, and come out the other side, blessed. Amen.