

"Wrestle Me Into a Blessing Lord!"

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Genesis 32:22-31

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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²²⁻²³ 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.

²⁴⁻²⁵ 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.

²⁶ The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."

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

²⁷ The man said, "What's your name?" He answered, "Jacob."

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."

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!"

³¹⁻³² The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. (This is why Israelites to this day don't eat the hip muscle; because Jacob's hip was thrown out of joint.)

I. FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORY

Did that bug you? Catch you off guard? Leave you a bit hanging—that we started in the *middle* of the story?

"But during the night he got up and took his two wives.....but Jacob stayed by himself....."

Did that leave you a little disconcerted that this story leaves a lot of unanswered questions, too many moving parts and confusing identities?

Let's look at it again—in a different translation.

Listen for the different characters and what they do. *Why* do they do what they do? Why so much mystery? Who *was* that masked man—that dark opponent who came and wrestled with Jacob in the middle of the night? Was it a river demon? An angel of the Lord? God himself?

Who won the match? *Was* there a winner? What does it mean he touched his hip socket and he limped for the rest of his life? Did he *really* "demand a blessing?" Can you *do* that?! Can blessings be demanded, or do they have to be bestowed as a gift? Was the limp the blessing?! That's a funny gift!

What can we learn what does Jacob's rough night by the Jabbok have to do with us—here in the 21st century? And, what on earth is this funky story doing in the first week of a series on Spiritual Resiliency?! (Read the MSG)

II. JACOB FINDS HIMSELF—ALONE

So, let's ask some questions and get a little background. One scholar calls this episode: "The embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob's dark night of the soul don't know about you, but I'm not sure what that means! Maybe we can boil it down.

Why was Jacob alone?

Because word on the street was that his brother Esau was coming after him with 400+ men—the standard euphemism for a "big, mad army." He had done the right thing by sending the women and children (as well as the goats, sheep, and chickens!) on ahead.

Why was Jacob troubled in the night?

Because Esau is coming after him with an army, and he doesn't know if his intentions are good or for evil. They've had a rough sibling rivalry relationship since they were in the womb together, and the last time they parted, it had not been under good circumstances!

III. JACOB FINDS HIMSELF—WRESTLING

With whom does he wrestle? It's unclear—and the biblical writer means to leave it that way. Was it an actual being—human or divine? Or, was it his own shadow—doubts and fears and things that go bump in the night? Was it the collective shadows of everyone he was in conflict with, and perhaps had wronged over his

lifetime of being shifty and a little crooked in his dealings?

Jacob is a wrestler his whole life long. From the moment he grabbed Esau's heel on the way to their twinly birth. Then they wrestle over Mom's favor and Dad's favor, over birthrights and blessings. In later years, he wrestles and "wheels and deals" with his father-in-law Laban.

He is a wrestler through and through. So, it's no wonder that the mysterious Presence comes to him *as* a wrestler. I wonder if the Presence might come to us in a different way—as a Singer, a Teacher, a Firefighter?

After the match—what does he demand? A blessing. Is that allowed? What can we expect from God? Or, to come out of the struggles we find ourselves in?

Did he *demand* a blessing? Or ask nicely? What does that word really mean—then and now Would be fun to play with that word—do a little Hebrew word study—anyone want to take a homework project and report back next week?

IV. JACOB FINDS HIMSELF—LIMPING

And then, Jacob is left limping! After all this. There's no clear winner or loser of the wrestling match, but he limps for the rest of his life as a result.

I've been limping! For several months now. You might not have noticed—it only happens when I've been sitting or lying down for awhile and I get up and try to walk. Don't worry—this is not slowing me down a whole lot, and is not new. I had a tennis injury 30

years ago that caused deterioration in my joint, and it's just getting worse as I get older and requires some adapting. I'm not so different from the rest of you!

But, because I have been limping physically, I have been also pondering what that means for me and my life spiritually. What is this limping a symbol of? What can I learn from it? What is the lesson I might glean from being reminded every day that I've been touched by life and have to lean on things and struggle a bit to get my balance before I can stand strong?

I imagine you might have a Holy Limp of some sort. The Apostle Paul called his a "thorn in the flesh." The word in Hebrew is translated oddly in our modern bibles—"he *struck* his hip socket"; like an assault. The original word is actually much gentler—"barely touched." Almost like God "gave a little magic touch" like we would appreciate from our favorite massage therapist: "skillful pressure on a pressure point" to release some of what's troubling us. Not smite or make it worse, necessarily!

Where has life and struggled touched each of us, like war wounds or badges of valor? Wrinkles and gray hair come to mind!

What reminds you every day, that you have experienced life fully, have been humbled and laid low, might need an arm to lean on? Maybe it's a blessing in some strange way—this reminder of God's presence in your life, like God was present to Jacob?

V. JACOB FINDS HIMSELF—AS ISRAEL

Jacob finds himself alone, wrestling, limping, asking for a blessing. He also finds himself with a new name! Israel.

On first brush, it's easy to skim through this story thinking the limp IS the blessing. And to wonder, what?! Is that how God blesses us? By giving us maladies?

"You have struggled with God and with humans, and have overcome. You are an Overcomer, and will now be given a new name to remind you of that whenever you forget," says the Being to Jacob after the match.

Jacob can mean "he who acts crookedly." Israel means "He who struggles with God." It doesn't necessarily imply "he who struggles with God and *wins!*" In this story, the opponent does tell him that "you have striven with the Holy and overcome." But, I wonder, if he has to live into that new name—for a long time and work at it every day?

Through the biblical tradition, he is not always called by his new—and more flattering name. Like Abram forever became Abraham. No, Jacob is often called Jacob *and* Israel in the same sentence—a kind of telling "poetic couplet."

He had to continually work at overcoming his old identity and habits—of being crooked and shifty—and claim his new identity of being one in close and dynamic relationship with God.

VI. WE FIND OURSELVES—LEARNING FROM JACOB

We find much to learn from Jacob—in all his shortcomings and confusing moments and crooked tendencies—past and present. For spiritual resiliency comes—not from the good days and the good ways—necessarily—but from the struggles, the “coulda, woulda shoulda” that we all encounter in this journey called life.

We learn:

1. God, the Holy One, the Divine Presence, comes to us in the darkest, most mysterious times and places.
2. That sometimes our biggest struggles are with *ourselves*. Our memories, our regrets, our bad choices (or “rock-and-a-hard-place lack of good choices” situations). Our broken relationships that may or may not be reconcilable.
3. That life and humans (and all creatures, really!) will have struggles of many kinds. Walking with God does not make us immune from being human. We can’t escape from being creaturely.
4. That sometimes it’s good to send the tribe on ahead, so you can face your demons and dark thoughts and fears on your own—though not *alone* because the Divine One never truly leaves us or forsakes us.
5. That you WILL make it through the struggle and prevail. You might not look or sound or walk exactly like you did before, but heck! There might be some truth to that overused adage: “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger!” (thanks, Oprah) ☺
6. That, in the end, after the end of the long night of struggle and scariness, on the other side of the river, is

Grace. A new identity—in the eyes of your Maker. In the name you are given in the world. In the way you are received and perceived—by yourself and others.

7. That you may well limp—actually, physically, or metaphorically, for the rest of your life—but it doesn’t mean you lost the battle, there, in the darkness. Or, that you weren’t brave enough, but that you DID prevail and you have been marked, branded, touched gently by the very hand of God. And your life will never be the same.

VII. WHERE ARE WE LEFT?

Where do you wrestle with your night demons? Those dark spirits that come out of the river of sleep and won’t leave you alone?

Where do you wrestle with God? Is that okay?

Where do you need to ask for a blessing?

Is it okay to *expect* a blessing (or several) from our Creator and lover of our Souls?

Prayer: Wrestle me into a blessing, Lord. Stay with me in the darkness of the night, when doubts and fears fill my being. Stay with me when daylight breaks. Touch me with your gentle hand, to remind me of your never-leaving Presence. Bless me with your call on my life. Amen.