

“Wrestling Match”

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-16

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Now I know that we have a lot of very patient, understanding, tolerant people in our congregation. I am TRYING to be one of them. But are there any of you who rebel, maybe just a little bit, at the adjective ‘O-L-D?’ That somehow, when a person or object is referred to as ‘OLD,’ it means that they are no longer valuable, no longer as useful or trustworthy as they used to be?

I have gotten into the habit when speaking of someone whose friendship goes back many years to NOT say ‘my OLD friend,’ but my ‘LONGTIME friend. Just because of that negative connotation of the term ‘OLD.’ Friendships, like many other things, actually can get BETTER and MORE VALUABLE with age... like fine wines...

And that’s how I feel about this ‘left side’ of the Bible... aka, the ‘OLD’ Testament. While it may come to us from a ‘LONGTIME’ ago, there are many valuable lessons we can learn from its ‘ancient words’ in how to live out our Christian faith TODAY! There is much we can relate to in the **“Wrestling Match”** that Jacob had with the ‘man of mystery’ in today’s passage from Genesis... as we ourselves ‘wrestle’ with God and God’s creation in our own modern everyday lives...

When we first see Jacob in this story, he is traveling with his family and servants to see his estranged brother Esau. (Or, as he may have been called ‘Red,’ as his name means the color that Esau was described at this birth). The one that Jake had betrayed by withholding food from his until he gave up his “birthright” ... that most valuable identity affecting one’s inheritance and status. And even though much time has passed, it is likely that Jacob is STILL thinking up ways he might continue to live up to his name: for Jacob means “grasps the heel” (which he is said to have done to his older twin as they were being born). Jacob’s name could also be translated “the deceiver.” Which is one of the synonyms for the evil one, the Devil, OUR ‘adversary’ on this earth.

That spot on the banks of the Jabbok river is one of great change for Jacob. What is referred to as a ‘liminal’ or ‘transitional’ time in his life. A **‘crossroads,’** if you will. There Jacob would stand between his secure place of homeland to an insecure place of exile. A time to escape from the past to encounter the future. Between what WAS and what was NEXT.

In his troubled life, this time just before daybreak was perhaps his darkest moment. He was ALONE. Wondering if God was with him; knowing that he didn't deserve God's presence. **A time of waiting not knowing what future holds.** And we all know that such uncertainty RARELY FEELS GOOD! BUT... the truth is that it is in those transitional, "liminal" times when transformation occurs. Change for the better.

It is those times of waiting, not knowing what the future holds... of feeling unworthy, or unsure, of God's presence... of feeling ALONE... that can certainly fill US with fear and doubt. BUT...that the day is "always darkest right before the dawn." (A saying authored by Thomas Fuller, a 17th C. English writer and church clergyman. Sometimes preachers can come up with some memorable statements.)

The truth is that it is in those transitional, "liminal" times in our own times of 'solitary RE-finement' when personal 'RE-formation' can occur. Times when 'the Spirit of the living God can, in the words of that familiar hymn, "melt me, mold me, fill me, use me." Melted, molded, filled and used for GOD's purposes, not merely our own.

It was this troubled yet God-anointed leader of the Israelites, grappling with God's will for his life, with whom we read that **"a man wrestled with him until daybreak."** (Gen. 32:24) Who WAS this mysterious 'adversary?' Was that 'man' God? One of God's heavenly messengers? Or an earthly one? The answer is... YES! It could have been any of those three. But suffice it to say that whoever it was certainly was **empowered** by God Almighty. One who was given **authority** to bestow great **blessing** on the wayward human 'deceiver' named Jacob. One who was not approached by Jacob, but took the initiative to engage him.

"Blessing." There's that 'Jacob-word' again. From his first 'food-fight' with his twin brother to now, Jake is always seeking a 'blessing.' Is this out of selfish narcissism? A continuing effort to prove, borrowing from the Smothers' Brothers, that his heavenly 'DAD always loved me best'? That word 'blessing' has a lot of quite honorable meanings: *"to make holy"* (as with a prayer, or the sign of the cross)... *to invoke Divine care... to protect, preserve; to show favor or approval; to enjoy prosperity, or happiness."* To seek 'blessing' in one's life is a noble pursuit indeed. To BE a blessing is even moreso! To wish someone to have a 'blessed day'... or to respond to that throw-away greeting, 'How-ah ya?' with 'blessed and highly-favored!'... is a

As I said earlier, we should note that it was this 'God/man' who engaged Jacob. It wasn't anything that Jake did to deserve this Divine 'wrestling match.' It was on God's timing, not his. I think we might call that 'GRACE.' A gift of God's presence that can not be earned, but only given. Though written centuries later, Jacob could agree with Paul's words to the Ephesians that we are **"saved by God's grace, through faith, not of works, lest any human might boast."** Jacob's pursuit of 'blessing' acknowledges that his success in life would not be because of his own strength, but one much greater.

This lesson perhaps was likely best learned in the midst of that very struggle with his 'opponent.' Who might also be considered his 'sparring partner.' Are you familiar with this boxing term? A sparring partner is actually part of the team that helps a boxer to prepare for his match against his true adversary. This mystery man was helping Jacob to be ready for future battles.

Jacob, in his earlier days, often grasped for control of things and people. Even going into this 'wrestling match,' he had Plans to manipulate Esau once again. In this struggle at the river, however, he realized he might be **outmatched.** With the injury to his hip, Jacob had to admit to his **mortality**, his **vulnerability.** Here Jacob wrestled physically, spiritually with who he was, what he had done, and where he was going. And that if he were to be blessed BY God, maybe he'd better be a blessing FOR God. Beginning with his red-headed twin, Esau...

Which is, in part, what we are to take away from the Matthew passage. Some of you likely recognized that we stopped short of getting to the 'punchline,' if you will, of this famous passage. In its entirety, it is known as "The Feeding of the 5,000." Arguably Jesus' most well-known miracle. One that has been read, preached on, and discussed by generation after generation of faithful followers of Christ... like you! But NOT today.

For I found myself drawn to stop at our Lord's reply to His disciples when they told Jesus that He should send away the hungry masses that had gathered to see and hear this miracle-working man of Galilee. 'It's late, Lord. There's no grocery stores or restaurants around here. Let them go home and fend for themselves.' To which Jesus answered them, **"They need not go away; YOU give them something to eat."** (Mt. 14:16)

Christ is telling his disciples, 'Look, I know that you want to be like me. But to be my follower, you have to do as I do. Indeed, by my power and strength you will do even greater things than I have. But you have to stretch yourself. Serve others as I have served them. Love them as I have loved you. When they grab the hem of your garment, stop and acknowledge the one who is in need. And address it. You want people to know me? YOU make me known... in word and deed! My sheep are hungry. Go feed them!'

Jesus' instruction to his disciples are akin to what Jacob experienced in his 'liminal' moment 'down by the riverside.' If his journey of life was to be blessed BY God, then he needed to be a better blessing FOR God. And while our struggles with God, and man, may not be the same as Jacob's, we too can feel **outmatched**, overwhelmed. The injuries we suffer to mind, body, and spirit remind us of our own **mortality**, our own **vulnerability**. We too wrestle physically, emotionally, spiritually with who we are, what we have done, and where we are going. And that if WE are to be blessed BY God, then we'd better be a blessing FOR God. And to do so, we need to rely on a strength greater than our own.

Too often we can think of the blessings of God to be physical, tangible, monetary. But remember some of those words I used earlier synonymous with 'blessing': "*holy... care... to protect, preserve; to show favor or approval; happiness.*" Jacob's blessing came out of a face-to-face encounter with God, who cared, who would protect and preserve his life, who offered his approval and happiness in a life that would follow HIS will.' Obedience that would result in him being given a new name, a new life... because of his struggle with God. Face-to-face. REAL. GENUINE.

In this week's "These Days," I read some comments about Jacob's struggle that SO resonated with me that I'd like to leave you with them. They well describe our own personal struggles as well: "Human nature seeks **things**; God's nature seeks **relationship**. Relationships only grow & develop when those involved are **authentic & honest**. Many people know *about* God but never have a true, life-changing encounter *with* God. A 'come-to-Jesus' moment. Such **vulnerability** requires **recognition** and **confession** of our mistakes so that we might be **forgiven** and **renewed**. *Our renewal is NOT an end or one-time event but a beginning that involves a continued wrestling with God's purposes and intent.*"

In ALL of our relationships... human and Divine... let us always seek to be authentic... honest... vulnerable. In humility let us confess our faults to God and one another, that we might be forgiven and renewed. Renewal that continues to wrestle with God's purposes for our lives. As we seek to be faithful followers, may it not be just through knowing about God, but in true, life-changing encounters with God. How do we experience these encounters? In the words of a/that popular song, "GIVE ME JESUS." For every struggle we have on this earth, 'Give me Jesus.' Now THAT's a 'wrestling match' made in heaven... and lived out right here on earth...

CHARGE & BENEDICTION:

Touched, changed, called, and empowered,
go now in the **power** and **provision** of CHRIST
to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and serve the world.
Just as we have done at this Table this morning, Jesus himself, who **holds** you in his hands, has **blessed** you, **broken** you, and **given** you as his gift to the world.
May the grace of Christ be multiplied to you and through you,
now and forever. As you go forth as His 'blessed and broken' creation, KNOW...

Questions for Reflection

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (Gen. 32:24). Why do you think God allows times of struggle in our lives? How have times of struggle affected your walk with God? How does your relationship with God affect your view of overwhelming problems in the world, such as hunger, poverty, violence, or injustice?