

Genesis 32:22-31 (CEB)

Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."

Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." The sun rose as Jacob passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh.

---

A couple of weeks ago we met Jacob as he dreamt of God speaking to him from a great stairway to heaven where God offered him a promise of land, descendants, and protection. This was somewhat strange because Jacob wasn't a very good person, having stolen from his family, which necessitated fleeing from them to save his life, and because he was the younger son of Isaac, and blessings generally went to the oldest. Jacob's complexity as a biblical hero makes him an intriguing study, especially because, as we have heard, Jacob is Israel, the man who would literally and figuratively father a kingdom. If it wasn't strange enough that God offered such a grand promise to someone so questionable as Jacob, Jacob turned around and put conditions on whether or not he'd believe God. He was a trickster in his own right, so it makes sense that he wasn't trusting. He told God that if God followed through with all the promises, then he'd claim the God of Isaac and Abraham as his own God. Everything that happened between that promise being made and today's reading was fulfillment of the promise. Jacob arrived in his mother's home country and met his uncle, Laban, who promised him a job. He, in turn, promised to work for Laban for 7 years if he could wed his cousin Rachel, but he was tricked into marrying Leah, his

older cousin, instead. To marry Rachel too, he had to promise to work for another 7 years, which he did. Marrying two sisters who are also your cousins sounds like it's more of a plot to a Mormon Lifetime movie than biblical events, but it got even stranger than that, because Rachel and Leah began to compete with one another about who could have the most children for Jacob, that they even gave Jacob their servants as surrogate mothers to pad their numbers. By the time he was done working his 14 years for Laban he had 11 sons and at least one daughter. God promised children, and God delivered. In addition to all the kids, Jacob had also become fabulously wealthy. Wealth in that day and age was counted in the number of animals one had, and Jacob was just as prolific in generating animal herds as he was at making babies. Jacob had another dream telling him to go back to his home country, and bargaining his exit with Laban ended up with more trickery being used and a stolen idol, but Jacob was protected because God promised him safety. That promise of safety was particularly important because if Jacob was going to enter back into his home country, he'd have to face Esau. Esau plainly said that the next time he saw Jacob, he'd kill him, so Jacob was understandably cautious in how he approached reconciliation. All that God had already done for him apparently wasn't enough to show Jacob that God would follow through in the promise, because Jacob tried a few strategies of his own to protect himself. First he sent a messenger ahead of him to test Esau's temperament. The messenger returned with the news that Esau planned to meet with him with a force of 400 men, and Jacob was absolutely terrified. He cried out to God, and in a brief glimmer of self-awareness, Jacob admitted that he wasn't deserving of God's care, but he asked for protection anyway. But, again, he built in his own protections, not trusting that God would follow through. He split up everything he owned into several groups and set aside incredibly lavish gifts for Esau. Each group would be spaced out so that Jacob's servants would meet Esau multiple times and give him gift after gift, and Jacob hoped it'd soften his anger by the time Jacob finally showed up at the end of the procession by himself.

It's in his loneliness and fear that we met Jacob in today's reading. After sending his wives and children and all his possessions across the Jabbok River, Jacob stayed on the other side. There he encountered a mysterious stranger and they began wrestling. We're never told why they wrestled, only that the mysterious man appeared and they wrestled until the break of dawn. It remained a draw between the two the whole time, but as dawn approached the mysterious stranger wanted to be finished with the match, so he struck Jacob on his thigh with such force that he tore Jacob's thigh muscle. Other translations say the injury was the dislocation of the hip, but either way, it was a serious injury. If the stranger was capable of delivering such a devastating injury, you have to wonder why he waited so late in the fight to deliver it, but even the agony of the torn muscle didn't deter Jacob. Inexplicably, Jacob refused to let go of the man until he received a blessing. We might never know exactly why he conditioned his release on a blessing, but we know he received it. The stranger asked

Jacob's name, and after hearing said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won." Israel is a compound of the Hebrew words "sarah" - to persist - and "el" - God, so it literally means God persists. The explanation the stranger gave for the name is that because Jacob struggled with God and men and won. His winning the fight is questionable, it ended with Jacob gasping the stranger for dear life hoping for a blessing, but the real struggle was something entirely different, and there it seems Jacob did win.

I've talked a lot about Jacob's bad qualities, but he had good ones, too. In stealing Esau's birthright for a bowl of lentil stew, he laid claim to a grand promise that his brother found no value in. Esau cared only about satisfying immediate, temporal needs, while Jacob cared for the future. That care led him to act unscrupulously, but he did it with the best of intentions. We all know where good intentions can lead us, but that's where the real struggle comes into play. Jacob had to struggle with his own ego, how he mistreated those around him, and the love he felt for his family. Throughout it all, God was there with him. Jacob struggled to accept God's love and care, but God persisted. That persistence finally led to a river bank where Jacob fought for his life, and in doing so became a new man. He carried a permanent scar from that encounter in the form of a limp, but it reminded him of the struggle he had come through. He'd never be able to walk with egotistical swagger again, but it was okay, because Jacob was no longer Jacob the trickster, but Israel, the man who had overcome his struggles to become the father of a great nation because God's love persisted and he finally allowed it to change him.

Theologians have all sorts of theories about who the man was that Jacob wrestled, because scripture never explicitly says. That it was some sort of spirit seems to be the generally accepted thought because the man wanted to go so badly at the break of dawn, and ancient peoples believed spirits could roam the earth in darkness, but not daylight. Some say this spirit was a demon, some say an angel, some say it was God Almighty. We don't really know, but Jacob himself renamed the site of the wrestling match Peniel, because he saw God face-to-face and his life was saved. That new name leads us to believe that maybe it really was God that he wrestled. And if so, we must ask ourselves, what does wrestling with God mean for us?

I've always felt that any expectation that we won't need to wrestle with our faith is absurd. If you don't question whether or not you can trust in God's promise on a near daily basis, then you're probably not paying attention to the world around us. That's especially true in the dark moments of our lives - when we have to watch loved ones suffer, when we're powerless to make a much needed change in our lives or in the community around us, when we see horrific events unfold near and far - we question everything we believe. None of us are weak because we wrestle with our faith or God - we do it because we're human. If Israel himself had to fight and struggle to finally see God for who God is - loving and kind and a keeper of promises - then of course we will, too. From Israel's own name we learn that God is persistent.

God's love transformed an egotistical trickster into a hero. The story of Jacob is also the story of the kingdom of Israel, a broken people not deserving of much of anything, but chosen by God, claimed and loved all the same. God's persistent love continued even as they did horrible things, when they were destroyed, when they were forced into slavery and exile. Both the times in slavery and exile should have been the end of their story, but it wasn't because God persisted. That persistence eventually led to God walking among us and teaching us how to live so that we, like Jacob, could see God face-to-face and be saved.

Our own wrestling matches will come. Eventually we all wrestle with God somehow, somehow. Some of us will wrestle with God again and again, because if you're like me, you can be really stubborn and a bit of a slow learner. We'll all carry marks from these matches, some of which might leave us permanently scarred. Some of us will be broken totally, while others of us will refuse to break. My hope is that all of us will hold on to God with all we have and all we are, refusing to let go until we, like Jacob, receive God's blessing and allow ourselves to be changed. Truthfully, we already have God's blessing, Christ died and rose again ensuring that we are all heirs of the promise. What we lack is change. We can't beat ourselves up for allowing ourselves to feel overwhelmed and wrestle with doubts, just as we can't allow ourselves to be beaten down by them. Take assurance in the love of God, which brought people far worse than us, in worse situations than we'll ever face, to hope and joy. If God can do it for them, God can surely do it for us. God's love is persistent. It will follow you everywhere you go, through the good and bad decisions you make, in times of stress and joy, in the darkness as well as the light. Remember Paul's words we heard last week - there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God - and if we can't be separated from it, it will change us. Our call is to let God's persistent love move into our lives in pervasive ways. Let your love be just as persistent as God's. Take every opportunity you have for reconciliation. Don't stop loving someone because they've lied or cheated or wronged you, find new ways to love them and seek healing. Allow yourself to go above and beyond for love, even if it's never reciprocated, because if there's one thing you can always count on, it's that God's love will be there no matter what, and that love is enough. Thanks be to God for never giving up on us. May we never give up on God. Amen.