

Sermon on Genesis 32: 22-31
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I have been gathering with a group of people from around here early on Tuesday mornings for a Bible study. Each week, we study a Biblical passage from the weekly selections of the lectionary. Usually, after reading the passage, I begin our conversations by saying something like, "What did you hear that was new or different or shocking or humdrum?" I think they've come to expect this question. This week, I threw them a curve ball. After reading this story about Jacob, I said, "Do you like this story?" They just looked at me. Then, someone sort of snickered. Then, they looked at me some more.

I did have a reason for asking the question. The reason is that this is one of my favorite passages of scripture. I like it because I can relate to it in so many ways. One way is that I have very vivid dreams. Many times I wonder when I wake up if they really happened. And, lots of times, they are very bizarre, so bizarre sometimes that I don't want to tell anyone for fear they will think I am a few sandwiches short of a picnic. Ross has come to dread the words, "You're not going to believe what I dreamed last night." But, he does like that better than when I get up in the morning and punch him for something he did to me in my dream. Somehow he seems to think that he isn't responsible for those things.

Another reason I like this story is that Jacob is alone in the dark. There is rarely a night that goes by when I don't wake up. Everyone else is quiet, peacefully sleeping, without a care in the world. And I am wide awake, worrying,

running through things in my head, dreading, fearing...and most of all, not sleeping.

So, I can relate to Jacob in a very real way.

The gathering of people on Tuesday morning never really answered the question about their taste for the story, but they certainly answered it based on their feelings about Jacob. One member of the group called him a “sniveling, conniving sneak”. Others appreciated him because he certainly was never perfect, and yet, God loved him and used him for great things anyway.

So, let’s think about Jacob for a bit. Twenty years prior to this story, he cheated his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance and his blessing as the first born son. He totally deceived both his father and his brother to become the favored one in the family. After tearing his family apart and fleeing for his life, he has a dream of angels going up and down on a ladder between heaven and earth. Following the dream, he promises that God will be his God if God will follow through with all God promised in prospering Jacob.

After Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, he prospers by tricking his uncle Laban out of flocks and land. Laban’s sons get angry and Jacob must flee again—this time returning to his own land because God tells him to. God says it’s time to go home.

Realizing he will have to face his brother, Jacob comes up with a plan to appease Esau. He sends a great amount of his wealth to his brother in hopes of gaining his favor. He sends goats, ewes, rams, camels, cows, bulls, and donkeys. Imagine waves and waves of animals crossing the distance between

them, kicking up clouds of dust, to meet Esau. Jacob thought that with these gifts, he could control what was happening. He could make a good outcome happen. He has done everything in his power to make this relationship work out for his best interests. And, to cover his bases, he prays to God, reminding God, that he, Jacob, has a deal with God. God has promised that he will be okay, so God needs to keep up that end of the deal.

And then the sun sets and night falls over the landscape. Jacob has sent everyone else to the other side of the river. The fire has died down to grayish embers. The moon has waned. The river rushes by, but other than that, the world is deathly still. And, Jacob lies awake. Suddenly, there is someone with him. In Hebrew, this someone is an “ish”, a man. Some translations say it is an angel. Jacob, in the morning, says it is God.

Of this wrestler, Walter Brueggemann says that “at night heaven and earth come together and redefine us in radical ways” (*Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*, 133). Whatever this meeting between heaven and earth is, it wrestles mightily with Jacob. For a long time, no words, just one body against another. Sweat dripping. Bodies writhing. Separate and yet one. One move against another. Equally matched. Equally paired. Neither one giving ground.

This is something totally different than what Jacob has been doing in the daytime. He’s not in control here. He can’t win through his own devices. He’s called in these moments to face his very deep fear that comes from this long broken relationship with his brother. He has to struggle with it, wrestle with all the angst, worry, pain, helplessness. He can’t manipulate this situation for his

own good. The wrestling in the dark has to come before the reconciliation with God and with his brother.

It is as if God is saying to Jacob that for too long, Jacob has been trying to control his own life, his own destiny. And, for too long, he has been avoiding the deep fear and hurt with his brother. He must face the fear and the pain to begin the reconciliation process. And, he must let God be God for Jacob, with Jacob. He must turn and see God face to face and realize that God is in control, not Jacob. Instead of manipulating and controlling, Jacob must relinquish what he sees as his own control.

Can't you see yourself in this? We go along, giving lip service to God and God's control in our lives. And we stack the cards in our favor, working for our own good in the world and in relationships. We work hard to make everything work out for our own success and happiness. And then, comes the nighttime. It's dark, and we are alone. And, we are confronted with our deepest fear, our deepest brokenness. If we are brave enough, instead of picking up the book by the bedside to escape or going to the alcohol cabinet for something to help us relax, we wrestle. We writhe. We struggle. And something in us is broken, but something deeper in us is healed.

In the facing of the fear comes the healing. In the striving with God, comes the reconciliation with both God and the other. God never promised it would be easy. As we look at Jacob, we see it may be painful and gut-wrenching. And it may take a long time, but the healing will come in the morning.

So, I ask you, what is most frightening to you that you go to great lengths to avoid dealing with it? What relationship in your life needs mending? What or who calls to you for reconciliation? What unresolved issue or relationship preoccupies your life? For these are the things that separate you from God and from your brothers and sisters. And the pain of that separation is much greater than anything that might come from wrestling with God.

Toward daybreak, Jacob asked for a blessing from this being. And the blessing given was a new name, Israel, which means the one who strives with God. Eugene Peterson translates it as the one who engages with God. The name certainly evokes pain, but more than that, for me, it evokes intimate relationship with God. What more could we want in life?

After the striving and the re-naming, Jacob is able to go to his brother to ask for forgiveness. He is able to seek reconciliation. He is able to turn from the past wrongs that he has committed and from twenty years of heartache and fear. But only in the painful wrestling comes the courage, the strength, and the joy that life could be lived any other way.

So, I ask you two more questions. What might happen if you engage with your fear if you allow God to come in and speak to it? What might you lose and what might you gain? It seems to me that we might all gain new life as strive with God, as we wrestle with our deep pains, knowing that God is with us in the wrestling. And, it might lead us into new life with our sisters and brothers, the new life promised to us in Jesus Christ.

The next time that God calls you home from a foreign land, don't turn away, even though it might be excruciatingly painful. Remember Jacob and ask for the blessing. And hang on for we are headed home.