

Genesis 32:22-32
Wrestling with God, Man
7/31/05
Michael Stanfield

The portion of the story about the patriarch, Jacob, that I am about to read, is one of the richest texts in scripture. If you will recall, twins were born of Rebecca and Abraham's son Isaac.

But God comes to Rebekah, even before the two are born and tells her that the older will serve the younger. And when the two *are* born – the first is called “Esau”, which means, in Hebrew “hairy” –because, in fact, Esau has thick red hair. The second is born grasping Esau's heel. He is named Jacob, which means literally “to grasp the heel” which is also Hebrew euphemism that means “to deceive.” Soon enough we discover how Jacob lives up to his name.

Jacob and Esau live in one of the most dysfunctional – in other words, *human* families you are ever going to want to see. The parents play favorites. Isaac's favorite is Esau – a real man's man who loves the outdoors and is a skilled hunter. Rebekah's favorite is Jacob – preferring to hang out in the tents where he learns the more subtle, indirect, albeit, manipulative power of women in a very patriarchal society.

The time comes when Isaac is old and decrepit. He is now blind and believes his days are numbered. So he calls for Esau and tells him to go and hunt for game, to then prepare it and bring it for Isaac to eat so that Isaac may give him the blessing due him as first born son. In ancient civilization, it was the first born that automatically received the place of power and wealth when the patriarch of the household became very old. This was done ritually with a meal and a verbal blessing by the father. And such blessings, once uttered, were thought to then have a life of their own. They were final and could not be undone.

Rebekah, of course, knew this and she had been eavesdropping on Esau and Isaac. Upon hearing that Isaac was about to hand out the family blessing, she quickly gets Jacob and tells him that she will prepare a meal for him so that he may go in and steal the blessing from Esau. She even puts a sheepskin on the smooth skinned Jacob's hands and neck to fool the elderly Isaac. And so, Jacob goes and receives the blessing and then leaves just about the time Esau returns. Upon discovering his brother's deception, Esau is filled with rage and plots with some of the servants to kill him.

Yet, once again, the eavesdropping Rebekah intervenes, helping Jacob to flee to her brother, Laban's home where for the next twenty years he works and is himself deceived on more than one occasion *by* his uncle. Be that as it may, Jacob eventually marries both of Laban's daughters – Leah and Rachel.

By the time we get to our morning text, Jacob has fathered 11 children. He has prospered... and so, he leaves his Uncle Laban in order to return to his home, all the while hoping that time might have mellowed Esau's murderous anger toward him. So he sends word with a treasure trove of gifts for his brother – only to find that Esau is coming to meet him – with 400 men! Jacob is

understandably terrified. He prays that God will protect him from his brother and it is here that our text for this morning begins. Listen:

²² The same night he (that is Jacob) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel (which means, in Hebrew, face of God) saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, amen.

A first-grade teacher seated her students in a circle. She asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One by one, each child got up and announced, "I'd like to be a nurse like my mother," or "I want to be a banker like my father," or "I want to be a teacher like you, Miss Smith."

The last child to speak was the most shy and timid little boy in the class. He said, "When I get big, I'm going to be a lion tamer in the circus. I'm going to face those animals with my whip and chair and make them leap through hoops of fire and obey all of my commands."

Seeing the disbelieving looks on the faces of his classmates that he could ever act so boldly or bravely, he was quick to reassure them, "But, of course, I'll have my mother with me."

As we look in on the Mama's boy, Jacob this morning, we find that *his* Momma is nowhere to be found. Jacob is all alone in his guilt, his anxiety, his terror. Twenty years before, Jacob had cheated his brother and fled from him un-reconciled. It is as if, in turning around to go home, the twenty years never happened.

This story speaks to us who have adversaries – who have relationships that are broken. Returning to face these relationships can grip us with a fear and a dread that is indescribable. The anxiety chews at us in a deeper than usual way. This story of Jacob is much more than a story about Jacob. It is the story of all of us. His story is our story.

I can remember my very first call as solo pastor of a church. I was 28 years old, it was a 300-member church and I had no idea what I was doing.

Yet I charmed them into believing I was very confident and knew exactly what I was doing. But, as you might guess, the truth became known soon enough. I made mistakes and unfortunately this particular church was not very forgiving. After being there for about a year and a half, the clerk of the session comes to me one day and informs me that he has recently conducted a rump session of about 25 people at his house and that they had come up with a list of about twenty things that were wrong with me and my ministry. As you might imagine, this was devastating. I wanted at that moment to be anything but the pastor of a church – and especially not that church.

By the grace of God, I knew some older, wiser colleagues that gave me some wonderful support and excellent advice. I would take these complaints to the session with my own comments, owning those things that I was responsible for, but also not taking responsibility for those things that did not belong to me.

At the tender age of 28, I don't believe I have ever looked forward to a meeting with such dread. There were 18 elders on that session; and I had no idea who from that session had been at the Clerk's house, and therefore who was friend or foe. Nights leading up to that meeting, were restless and full of dreams where I wrestled and fought with adversaries of every shape and kind. I was at odds with one of the most important relationships of my life – the church – and I was about to attempt a reconciliation and I was terrified.

And so it was with Jacob as he looked forward to his meeting with his estranged brother. In the night, Jacob wrestles. But just who is this nightly visitor? Is it a man or is it God?

The text plainly says that “a man” wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. But when the wrestling match is over, it is clear that the ‘being’ with whom Jacob has wrestled is capable of giving a kind of blessing that could only come from God; and when Jacob asks for such a blessing, the ‘being’ renames him ‘Israel’ meaning ‘strives with God’, “because,” says the being, “you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

So, there is a sense in which Jacob is wrestling with himself, wrestling with Esau, wrestling with the destiny of his people and wrestling with God all at once. I believe this text is purposefully vague because it speaks to a very deep truth about scary encounters: They frequently are all mixed up with the deeper struggles that make up the themes, not just of our lives, but of those we may be called to serve... At such times, God often appears not as a figure of love and light but as tormentor and adversary.

The prospect of a face-to-face encounter with anything that is beyond our human comprehension is always terrifying; it causes us to wrestle...

I remember that in those fearful, fretful, sleepless nights before I had to meet with that session and attempt a reconciliation, I wrestled with my calling as pastor, my identity as a child of God, my integrity as a person, as well as with the people and the God who seemed to be causing me so much pain.

I realized in all of that just how vulnerable I was – and how wounded. But like Jacob, I would face my accusers, I would own up to my part in the rift. And in so doing I would discover that it was in this wounding, in this humbling experience that I would find a new calling.

So, I understand Jacob. Jacob's greatest triumph is also his deepest wounding. He prevails in that wrestling match but only sort of. He does receive a blessing and a new identity. But his hip is knocked out of joint and he will forever walk with a limp.

This story would hint at the fact that great woundings often accompany great blessings. After all, isn't this pretty much summed up once and for all in the cross of Jesus Christ? Do we not sing and proclaim that it is by his stripes that we are healed? The greatest wound known to both God and humanity is precisely the point from which salvation and healing for the whole world flow.

The crux of this story about Jacob is that God blesses whom God will bless – even scoundrels like Jacob. But God never gives such a blessing for the sake of the individual only. God gives blessings to individuals in order for *them* to be blessings to others. So there's a catch. With God, in order to be a blessing for others – in order to grab hold of our destiny, we have to risk being vulnerable, weak, wounded.

I was watching a movie the other day with Danny Aiello. He played a mobster who was a real loser. At some point in the movie, he encounters another loser – a washed up Hollywood writer whom he has haphazardly kidnapped along with a bunch of other folks. At some point the washed up writer asks the Aiello character to give him his word of honor about releasing everyone when the time comes – because, he says, “You can never believe in the promises of a winner but you can bank on the promise of a loser.” You can bank on the promise of a loser.

If I am in trouble with my marriage or my children, the last person I am going to share this with is someone who seems to have a perfect marriage and kids. I want someone who I can tell has truly been humbled by the difficulties in their family but who still remains hopeful and loving.

Likewise, if I am having great difficulties in my congregation, the last person I want to go and see is someone who has never experienced the deep pain of feeling alienated by the very people he thought God called him to serve. I want someone who really got raked over the coals at some point but learned from it and remains in ministry joyfully serving God, but doing so with a limp.

But most of all, if I am having soul wrenching difficulties with my life and my calling, and feel weak and defeated, I don't want a Warrior King as savior, I want someone who knows what it is to suffer the depths of defeat – even death – like Jesus.

There appears to be a kind of strange but true spiritual theme that is repeated in the scriptures: it is only one who has been wounded in the quest to be faithful that is given the new possibility of becoming a healer and a blessing on God's behalf – and usually the deeper the wound, the greater the gift. In this way, Jacob (renamed Israel) prefigures Jesus, the Christ.

It is one of the reasons why a favorite TV movie character of mine is Jesse Stone, played by Tom Sellec. Stone is the Chief constable of Paradise, Massachusetts, population 4000. The character

of Stone is a former LA detective who was fired for showing up to work drunk. He was hired by a crooked Paradise politician because he thought Stone would be easy to control. Of course he was wrong. Stone is a deeply flawed and wounded human, who, like Jacob, is anything but controllable. Instead, he has a laser like focus on justice, but is merciful and kind when he needs to be. There is a quiet depth and intense caring that overwhelms Stone at times and is what makes him so endearing. Stone is not just a law enforcer – he is a broken bringer of healing and wholeness.

My terrifying meeting with the session in my first church went well. It was the first of many frank discussions about how our future as pastor and congregation would be. Out of that dialogue a new relationship was forged – one where together we were able to realize the 38-year dream that that congregation had of building a new sanctuary. God’s wounding of me was also and at the same time, God’s blessing. Though still wary and tentative, we were enabled to have a more healthy relationship.

This was also the case with Jacob. He was enabled from the God/man with whom he wrestled, to meet his brother courageously, but with head bowed. To his amazement, Jacob’s brother, having been equally blessed, had long ago forgiven Jacob. And so began the possibility of a new kind of relationship.

This morning, our text asks us all, do we find ourselves posturing because we want to hedge our bets when it comes to relying on God? If so then maybe it’s time consciously to invite God in the mix – maybe it’s time to put ourselves in the more scary position – like that of Jacob and of our Savior Jesus – of being vulnerable, with the assurance that with God, it is out of the wounds in attempting to be faithful that our future blessings will flow. Our gifts are worth nothing if they are not grounded in God’s, as well as our own, weakness.

The room was quiet save for the whisper of waves along the shore of the retreat center on Long Island Sound. Henri Nouwen had just returned from Holland, where he had shared with his beloved mother her last painful weeks with cancer. Emotionally and physically spent, Henri hunched intently over a sheaf of blank white paper, pen in hand. He was beginning the story of his mother’s final struggle, later published under the title “In Memoriam” (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1980).

Knowing that with his mother’s death he had lost his emotional sea anchor – the stabilizing force in his energetic, far-flung life – he was asked at the time by a reporter friend why he was writing this manuscript. “Because,” he responded, “I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others.” --John S. Mogabgab, Weavings, September-October 1998, 2.

Let us pray. Gracious God, help us to trust you by being willing to become vulnerable for your sake so that in turn, our struggles might be used to help others.

And now bless these gifts that they might support the most vulnerable among us so that they will know of your love. We pray in Christ’s name, Amen.