

Come Strive with Me
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
August 3, 2014
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Text: Genesis 32:22-32

In one way or another, we've all been there, I suspect.

- A big project is coming due and you're feeling the pressure.
- Or in a matter of days a painfully difficult conversation with a family member that you've been postponing for years is going to be staring you in the face.
- Or any day now you're expecting the results of a biopsy and a diagnosis.

Whatever it is, you're in bed at night and you're not sleeping — just tossing and turning. This is different from a bizarre dream that's come out of nowhere and you can't shake — the kind that's so weird you're embarrassed to tell people about it the next day.

It's different because you know exactly what this is about. It's that situation you can't get out of your mind (as much as you'd like to) — the one you're afraid to face.

Welcome to Jacob's world.

The lectionary readings this summer have rehearsed the history. Years before Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his blessing by deceiving their blind father, and Esau was so furious that he promised to kill Jacob the next chance he got.

So Jacob left the country as fast as he could and settled in with his uncle, who soon became his father-in-law. But over time life with the in-laws got difficult, so now he's returning home, at least to the land God promised would belong to him some day — him and generations of descendants to follow.

But Jacob's also heard that Esau's going to be there waiting for him — with an army of 400.

So Jacob the Schemer has come up with a plan to appease Esau. With detailed instructions, he sends ahead livestock and everything he owns, plus his family, and the night before coming face-to-face with Esau, he camps by himself alongside the River Jabbok.

While he's trying to sleep there, he's jumped by a stranger, and the two wrestle with each other through the night.

You'd think the stranger would have the advantage, but somehow Jacob manages to hold his own through grit and determination. It's an exhausting struggle that continues until the night sky begins to brighten before the break of day.

The Midnight Stranger is not able to prevail, so he gains an advantage by wrenching Jacob's hip out of joint. Jacob screeches in agony but squeezes all the more, refusing to release his shadowy opponent.

When the stranger tells Jacob to let him go because the sun is about to come up, Jacob says, "Only if you bless me."

"What is your name?" he asks.

(whispering/groaning) "JAAA-cob."

“No longer. Your new name is Israel — one who strives with God and with humans and somehow prevails.”

Jacob asks for the stranger’s name, but he refuses to say and simply grants the blessing Jacob sought.

The stranger leaves, and Jacob names the place “Peniel” — meaning “face of God” — because he encountered God face to face and, miraculously, he survived.

Except for a limp, which stayed with him the rest of his life.

This night-long struggle is the turning point in an extended narrative of Jacob’s life, because it’s here that Jacob receives a new identity. Instead of bearing a name that means “Heel-Grabber ... Supplanter ... Cheater ... Go-Getter,” henceforth he becomes known as “Israel ... God-wrestler ... One who Strives with God ... (or even) God Strives.”

The meaning of the names he bears are varied and nuanced and mysterious and open to interpretation — just as the details of this overnight struggle are nuanced and mysterious and open to interpretation.

Where did this shadowy opponent of Jacob come from?

Was it a person? ... was it an angel? ... was it God?

WHY did he not know Jacob’s name ... and why would he not reveal his own?

If he had the ability to magically dislocate Jacob’s hip and inflict a permanent impairment, why couldn’t he have escaped altogether?

If he had the power to bless, why engage in a wrestling match at all?

Answers to those questions are left to the imagination, which simply adds to the power of this particular story. Not that Jacob’s life needs any more color and realism for us to say, “Whoa! I know people like Jacob!”

Jacob was a man of conflict who was famous for not always playing by the rules. He lived by his wits, knew what he wanted, and worked all the angles.

He prayed for God’s favor, but at the same time wasn’t about to take any chances by leaving it up to God to work out the details of his life.

He wrestled with his twin brother in their mother’s womb and drew the short straw when Esau was born first, but he came out gripping his brother’s heel. And then he waited for just the right opportunity, offering his famished brother a bowl of soup in exchange for the rights of being the first-born son.

“Jacob” wasn’t just his name; it was his identity.

He was “Heel-Grabber ... Supplanter ... Cheater ... Go-Getter.”

It was his way of life ... his way of living ... his identity.

But God was always in the picture, and somehow Jacob was always reminded of that. With Jacob’s conniving ways, I can imagine God at times SHAKING his head in disbelief.

(“Jacob, Jacob, Jacob ... what ARE you doing now?”)

Even on his good days, we still see Jacob striving with God, taking matters into his own hands — just in case God wasn't on the same page as Jacob.

But all the wrestling and all of the striving came to a head that night on the banks of the River Jabbok.

In a mysterious transaction, culminating a night-long struggle, Jacob is changed forever.

God gives the Supplanter/the Cheater/the Go-Getter a new identity — “Israel.”

And, just so he doesn't forget, this new identity comes with a limp, a lifetime guarantee reminding him who's really in control.

With all that's going on here, I must tell you that I am intrigued by this — for personal and professional reasons.

It should not come as a complete surprise that:

- when you ask someone to preach who is the Disability Concerns coordinator for your denomination,

- who bears some responsibility for raising disability awareness in the church,
- who is assigned this text from Genesis 32,
- and who himself walks with at least a waddle if not a limp —

well, you should not be surprised if I ponder some parallels of Jacob's new circumstance as a person with a disability and my own striving with God.

I am not suggesting that Jacob's limp or disability is the main thrust of this account, nor do I speak for all people with disabilities, but I do find it significant personally — and even instructive for anyone who struggles with their identity, with who they are.

My disability is one I was born with. Even though I wasn't always conscious of it, I've always lived with physical limitations — and they are getting progressively worse.

About 1 person in 5 today lives with a disability, and about 85 percent of them acquire their disability later on. So for most that means their disability is an intrusion, or a life change they have to adjust to.

That puts me in the minority since my own disability is wrapped up in my identity — so I have a hard time separating the two.

I am not my disability, and I am more than my disability — but I don't know life apart from my disability.

I am aware that some people with disabilities can be angry with God. They wonder why God permitted their disability, or how this can be God's plan for their life.

Or, as Jill Russell mentioned last week, perhaps they've had Bible verses like Romans 8:28 thrown at them: “God works all things together for good...”

Or platitudes have been slapped on like Band-Aids, so: “Turn your scars into stars.”

Or they've been urged to adopt popular slogans like: “Don't worry; be happy.”

But even if they have not been given simplistic answers to their sincere, searching questions, I can imagine how a disabling intrusion into their life and striving with God have not brought them to a place of acceptance or sense of well-being.

This hasn't been quite the case for me, but the closest I have come to that was after I had completed my seminary education.

At the age of 27 I left a good sports writing job in Chicago that I was enjoying in order to attend Western Seminary.

Ministry had not been a lifelong ambition or dream of mine, and I did not have a clear sense about where this was headed, but it seemed the right thing to do. Hard as it was to pin down, there was a sense of call — and a desire on my part to follow it (so I certainly did not go reluctantly).

Four years later, at age 31, with all the requisite credentials and references in hand, I was candidating with churches. Dozens of resumes and dozens of follow-up letters were sent to a variety of RCA churches—large and small, solo pastorates and staff ministries, East Coast to West Coast.

You name it, I applied for it.

I actually reached the interview phase with 10 different churches — and then received 10 letters saying “thanks, but no thanks.” Gradually, my wide-eyed enthusiasm for ministry in the church was tempered by the frustrations of a candidating process that went on for about a year.

No church would admit at the time, but the gnawing invisible barrier I sensed that was my disability, which I did not advertise but is visible when you meet me.

My trust in God's sovereignty and providence was growing thin.

That was more than 25 years ago; and, though my faith in God and in his redemptive purposes have deepened, any rejection that feels linked to my disability still stings.

In fact, the only time my disability felt like an asset in finding employment was when I pursued my current position as Coordinator for Disability Concerns. Otherwise, it's felt like I've had to overcome it.

So there's a part of me that identifies with Jacob and others who feel like they need to work very hard to create anything resembling a level playing field.

After all your contending with others and all your striving with God, you still come away feeling like it all depends on you.

But occasionally, in some remarkable moment of grace, you're reminded that it DOES NOT ALL depend on you.

You wake up to realize that God IS present, and that somehow, someday, God WILL work out his purposes.

We do not achieve that; it is given to us.

And yet, I also believe there is benefit in our searching and our reaching and our striving with God. It can help us understand not only who we are, but who God is.

There's the payoff — the benefit of a new realization that comes as a blessing from God.

You may have noticed that within this passage of Scripture there are several footnotes that explain names or offer alternatives for translating the original language.

In verse 28, Jacob's name is changed to Israel, "for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

The footnote in your NRSV says "Israel" means "The one who strives with God." Or, it could mean "God strives."

I find that footnote to be a point of grace.

Yes, Jacob strives with God — no doubt about that. But is it also true that God strives with us?

I think it is, and I think he does.

God lays out guidelines and instructions for how we are to live, but God also gives us choice and freedom in how we will live.

And God promises to remain faithful to us no matter what we decide or what we do.

Even when we violate God's desires for us, when we go another direction, when we sin and fall short of God's glory, he does not abandon us.

God stays with us, he doesn't give up on us, he does not take his Spirit from us — but remains committed to our good and directing our life through his Spirit in ways that are consistent with his purposes.

This sounds like striving to me. This is no hands-off policy that says "I want nothing to do with you."

God remains faithful to us. And we see God striving most vividly in the person of Jesus — God with us, God in the flesh.

We see Jesus humbling himself — not counting equality with God something to be grasped (like a twin brother's heel at birth), but emptying himself, taking the form of a servant.

That sounds like striving to me — God, in Christ, striving with us even as we strive with God.

I find that to be a gift of God's remarkable grace.

Frederick Buechner calls this episode the "magnificent defeat," because by losing, by getting defeated, Jacob somehow won after all.

In his new identity as Israel, he realized that the best things in life are not earned.

They are gifts of grace from a loving God who will not let us go.