Wrestling Jacob

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Pentecost + 10 A – Genesis 32 22-31

Have you ever wrestled with a worry or a problem all night? It might give us a way into compassion for Jacob’s night wrestling the stranger.

Our study group is pretty sure the original authors of Genesis had no access to a public relations editor. Stories of the biblical patriarchs – the great role-models of our faith – are often far from edifying. They are busy lying, thieving, putting wives and kids at risk, swindling parents, siblings, in-laws and strangers for personal gain; the list goes on. If scripture is supposed to draw us to God and make better people of us, why hasn’t somebody cleaned up Genesis and shown a better side of these patriarchs!

It seems a fair question. But it ignores what these stories are really about. They’re about God’s patient, loyal commitment to normal people who are very like normal people today – often self-centred, thoughtless and greedy. These stories are about God’s faithfulness, not ours.

Jacob was not a very nice person. He was a conniving trickster. From birth, Jacob was someone who’d grasp and take hold of what wasn’t his. Later Jacob tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright (25:29–34) and soon tricks him out of their father’s blessing as the firstborn. Esau was no angel, sure. But Jacob seemed like something else entirely.

To escape Esau’s revenge, Jacob headed to Haran and made a new life for himself with his uncle Laban’s family. But trickery pursues Jacob. He serves his uncle for seven years to marry Rachel, but gets tricked into marrying Leah first, and Rachel next. Then he marries their maidservants as well. Jacob stays

on working as his uncle's shepherd, but slips back into his old ways. He breeds his uncle's flocks to his own advantage. He ends up exceedingly rich by diddling his uncle and cousins. In the end Jacob flees with his family and flocks, planning to return to Canaan.

The story we heard today takes place when Jacob has heard Esau is coming out to get him – together with 400 men. Jacob does all he can think of: sending a conciliatory message to Esau calling him *my lord*, sending a multitude of gifts in multiple droves – 580 goats, sheep, donkeys, cows, and camels. And he prays the longest prayer in all of Genesis (32:9–12). He begs God, *Deliver me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all.* (32:11)

But just in case, Jacob sends all his wives and children and everything else he owns across the ford at the River Jabbok. He's left alone and stripped of everything dear to him. Suddenly out of the night-time darkness, *a man wrestled with him until daybreak.* (v. 24) Amazingly, Jacob holds his own; *the man saw that he didn't prevail.* (v. 25) But suddenly, the position is reversed. *The man* touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there helpless and crippled. Now with the desperate grip of one who has been defeated, Jacob will not let *the man* go. He demands a blessing from this mysterious figure.

What he's given is a name change and a blessing. Jacob's name is changed to Israel. The explanation for the name is that Jacob had *struggled with God and with humans and prevailed.* (Gen 32:28–29) But this blessing comes not through Jacob's wit or strength, not through his grasping for it. That had been his way of operating until then. But no, things have changed. The blessing comes as a gift given to one who's used up all his strength and resources and been defeated.

Who is this man that Jacob wrestled with? A punishing angel? His own ego or conscience? Or could this story be a metaphor for the whole people of Israel throughout history? Charles Wesley's great hymn *Wrestling Jacob* thinks it's Jesus – the Lord of time could do that, I suppose.

Jacob had earlier been given the promise of God's presence, but he didn't live by it. Jacob wrestled with this man using all his own strength, but didn't get away free and unchanged from his encounter. He'd got away with stealing from his father Isaac, from his brother Esau, and from his father-in-law Laban. But not from God! Jacob's limping becomes a metaphor for Israel's life with God. The people of Israel, like Jacob, will struggle and wrestle with God. God will promise and give blessing to Israel, but God will also struggle to tame and break the unruly and often disobedient Israel.

And Jacob, who is now Israel, does some naming of his own. He names the place Peniel, which means *Face of God*, for, he says, *I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.* (v. 30) For the first time, we're told the true identity of the one who wrestled Jacob – God in human form. And Jacob emerges from this divine encounter with a blessing, a new name, and the sun rising on a new day. But he also walks away with a permanent limp – a reminder of the cost of wrestling with God.

Why is this story important for us? It's because it reminds us that God actively reaches out to us – no matter what sort of person we might be. We Christians know that vividly from the stories of Jesus reaching out to people whom no-one else would go near: social outcasts, thieving tax farmers, people shunned because they lived outside the public morality of the day. Today, we see the way God blessed Jacob the thieving, selfish con-artist. A challenge, a blessing and a new beginning. Do you see how this reveals the God of the Old Testament and Jesus to be one and the same? God/Jesus reaches out to lift us

up from wherever we might have fallen, no matter how far; and helps us become people who can live the promise that through us and all descendants of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, all families of the Earth might be blessed.

Like Jacob we come to God with a life behind us, not all of it good. And like Jacob, we can expect that God will change us – often painfully. But in Jesus, we see God bearing that pain in our place. God remains faithful. God keeps at us and calls us back, no matter how far we've fallen. And in Jesus, we know that God takes our fall. Thanks be to God for such grace!
Amen