

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
July 31, 2011
Genesis 32:22-31
"Wrestling with a Stranger"
Pastor John Guthrie



Have you ever been in such dread of some approaching event that you couldn't sleep? In such dread that the event occupied your thoughts nearly every waking minute, making normal daily work nearly impossible? Of course you have. All of us have.

I can well remember putting a sizable dent in the side of my dad's car when I was eighteen. The agony over anticipating his reaction turned out to be much worse than the reaction itself.

In today's reading of Jacob wrestling with this stranger beside the seasonal creek known as the Jabbok, Jacob is also anticipating with dread what must happen the following day. He is going to meet his brother Esau, and Esau has very good reason to exact a cruel revenge on Jacob. In fact, Jacob is anticipating that Esau will do exactly that.

Jacob and Esau are twins. When they are born, Esau emerges first from the womb, so as the elder brother he inherits a special blessing from his father and also the largest share of the inheritance, his birthright. Jacob emerges second, grasping his brother's heel, and is given the name Jacob which means, the one who supplants or the one who replaces. That name turns out to be very prophetic.

When the two brothers have grown up, Esau comes in from hunting one day while Jacob is simmering a pot of stew. Esau is famished and asks Jacob for some of the stew. Jacob replies that he can have some if Esau will give him his birthright, the largest share of his father's inheritance. Esau readily agrees. So Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright. You may already be observing that Esau is not the brightest bulb in the box.

Sometime later as their father Isaac is nearing death, Jacob conspires with his mother Rebekah to steal Esau's blessing. Isaac is nearly blind, and Jacob disguises himself as his brother, then brings his father some food. Isaac gives Jacob the elder brother's blessing, and once the blessing is given it cannot be revoked. When Esau finds out what Jacob has done, he begins to conspire against him, planning to take his life after their father dies.

Jacob is forced to flee to Haran to escape the wrath of Esau, and on his way into exile has an amazing dream at Bethel. He sees a vision of a stairway from heaven and hears God's voice speaking to him the promise of the covenant given before to Abraham. In spite of his deceiving character God's promise will go forward through him.

Jacob becomes wealthy, takes two wives and two concubines, and has eleven sons, but his relationships with his wives and his father-in-law remain troubled and difficult. In response to God's urging, Jacob decides he must return home and face his brother Esau. Today's reading takes place on the night before the encounter with Esau.

Jacob is fearful that Esau still wishes to kill him and takes precautions. He sends gifts ahead, and he divides his household so that Esau could not attack and seize them all. Jacob returns to the other side of the Jabbok River and makes camp alone. In the night, a man seizes him and they wrestle until the coming of dawn. This encounter ends with Jacob transformed and is the climactic moment of Jacob's story.

Note that the text says "a man wrestled with him." Many artists throughout history have depicted the man as an angel, even having wings. Yet by the end of the episode, both Jacob and the visitor acknowledge this as an encounter with God. The presence of God in the midst of this struggle only becomes apparent as the struggle stretches on into the night. Jacob is wounded by a mere touch on his hip and limps away from the place. Perhaps this struggle with God in human form is intended to parallel the other human struggles Jacob has had. Perhaps it begins to suggest that God was present in those as well.

True to his previous character Jacob attempts to remain in control. He demands a blessing, but he receives a name. He then demands a name but receives a blessing. Clearly Jacob is not in control here, although he is tenacious, perhaps even courageous.

The name he receives is Israel, which means either "one who strives with God" or "God strives." In addition, the text states that Jacob has prevailed, not in the sense of winning, but in the sense of enduring. God initiates the struggle, but in the name "Israel," perhaps God expresses a willingness to stay in the ongoing struggle with God's people. The name Israel points to the history of a people and away from the self-seeking individualism of the name Jacob, the one who supplants. Jacob's past is in grasping for himself; Israel's future is in striving with God as part of God's people.

In the end Jacob knows he has met God in this human encounter, and he names the place Peniel, which means "face of God". Jacob knows that his life was at stake in such struggles ("my life is preserved"), and one has the sense he means this in more than a biological sense.

The full significance of what has happened to Jacob does not become clear until the next day when Jacob finally meets and is reunited with Esau. After great anxiety for Jacob over his fate at the hands of Esau, it turns out that Esau has long since forgiven him and is overjoyed at the prospect of reunion with his brother Jacob. The brothers embrace, and Esau gives not a blow but a kiss.

In Genesis 32 Jacob's transcendent experience of God at Bethel, with his vision of angels on the ladder, is now complemented by his horizontal experience of God at Peniel. Jacob no longer appears in the text as a scheming deceiver. He takes his place as a recipient of the

covenant promise.

Jacob limps away from his encounter with God with a new name and a bruised thigh. Both bear evidence not of Jacob's defeat but of his triumph as a result of his boldness in meeting the One who came to confront him in the silence of the night. Surely we are marked in life-changing, tangible ways as a result of our own struggles of faith. We limp away from painful experiences, knowing that God cared enough to confront us with the realities of who we are and then bless us even as God leads us to new life.

Wrestling with God is dangerous business. Nobody wants to end up limping, so we're tempted to accept an easy faith that avoids the struggles and never tackles hard questions. We want to believe that God makes no demands. We'd like to think that if we believe what we've been taught to believe, then God will make our lives easy, that good people will have good lives, and that God will save us from trouble.

Often we come to church hoping that it will make us feel better. We want to sing happy songs, pray pleasant prayers, and hear a sermon that tells us we're fine just the way we are. It's tempting to ignore the questions that are frightening, to avoid any danger that might leave a scar.

Life is hard. We have moments when we realize that we're not as certain as we once were. It isn't clear what God's doing, what God's trying to say to us, or what God wants from us. The easy answers don't work anymore.

We want to believe that God will always protect us from difficulties, but the truth is that taking God seriously can make our lives more difficult. Sometimes we leave church not with the assurance that we've found all the answers a queasy feeling in our stomachs because we've been found by the questions.

We aren't formed by success and a trouble-free existence. We are molded by our struggles. Sooner or later every one of us wrestles with the Loving Stranger who will not let us go. We never know when things will take a turn and suddenly we'll be face to face with our deepest fears and darkest doubts.

Could it be true that before we can truly love God we have to wrestle with God? God struggles with us to rule our lives, to wrestle us into the good purposes that God is working out. If we want to live deeply, then we may end up limping, but the people who know the blessing of God are almost always the ones who struggle with God.

Jacob, at the end of his all-night wrestling match, is able to identify his adversary as the LORD. He is amazed that he has survived, as well he should be. Of course, it has been the LORD's plan all along to use Jacob as the means of accomplishing his purpose, through Jacob's descendants, the people of Israel.

Even so, Jacob's adversary remains a stranger, an enigma, a mystery. So it is with us. Are you and I willing to wrestle with a Stranger whom we will never fully know, and even to give our lives to that Stranger, so that we may receive a blessing? Are we willing to strive with God, to wrestle with the hard questions and the hard answers, so that we also can be molded into the people we are meant to be?

In the end, it probably doesn't matter if we are willing or not. The LORD is going to wrestle with

us, anyway.