

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

22 The same night he 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, 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.

Sermon – Pertinacious in Peniel

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.

Our opening reading from Genesis tells of Jacob wrestling. The text says he was wrestling with a man, most interpretations say he was wrestling with an Angel of God, some suggest that this angel of God is Jesus himself. Either way – this is combat, body to body, flesh against flesh, the smell of sweat, dirt and blood – combat that rages throughout the night, until daybreak.

Now Jacob is no stranger to conflict. Before he was even born, Jacob and his brother Esau were already wrestling with one another in the womb, to such an extent that their mother Rebekah utters a prayer basically asking God 'Why me?' She asks God just what is going on inside her body and is told, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided..." (Genesis 25:23). And thus they were born, fighting even as they first see the light of day—first comes Esau, hairy and red, and then Jacob, holding on tight to his brother's heel, unwilling to give up the fight, just one minute old.

Over the years things don't improve much. As we continue through Genesis we next come across a scene from their adolescence, when the characters of the young men are being established. We find Esau, the hunter, the outdoorsman, the eldest with all the rights and privileges that are associated with his family position. Those privileges include the right to inherit double the amount of any other siblings. But Jacob, who was a decent cook and more of a homebody, had his own talents, which included a sharp sense of when the time is right to make a bargain.

On evening Esau came home after a day out in the fields, and he was famished. Jacob had made some lentil stew. As the smell of it wafted over Esau, and his belly rumbled, he asked for a bowl.

Jacob willingly offered to share with his brother – but only for a price: Esau’s birthright. Esau, not the pointiest arrow in the quiver, agreed without hesitation.

Fast-forward to young adulthood. The boy’s father Isaac, recognizing that his life was drawing to a close, asked for a gift of a special meal, hunted by his favourite son Esau so that he could bestow his fatherly blessing upon his firstborn, a once-in-a-lifetime gift, which could be given only to one person. With his mother’s help, Jacob disguised himself as his brother and stole the blessing. Esau’s cries of despair and rage when he learned what his brother had done were chilling, so immediately, Jacob hightailed it out of town.

He went to work for his uncle Laban far away, and while there he married two of Laban’s daughters. He made a deal with uncle Laban that for his wages Jacob could keep for himself any of the spotted or streaked goats from Laban’s flocks. Since Jacob’s job was to tend to the flocks of goats, he arranged it so that the strongest goats mated with spotted goats, and the weaker ones not, and so separated the flocks so that his own flock was strong and numerous, while his uncle Laban’s flocks were weak and sickly. As uncle Laban became increasingly angry, Jacob was forced to gather his wives, children, camels and goats and run away in the middle of the night.

Which brings us to today’s scene. Jacob was on the run from his uncle Laban, but now Jacob is running back towards his brother from who he stole, well, just about everything. He has just learned that his brother has heard that he is coming, and Esau was on his way with four hundred armed men. Jacob anticipated that the fighting that began in the womb was about to continue.

In fear, he had split his caravan into two groups, hoping at least one group will survive his angry brother. He had also sent an offering of hundreds of goats and rams and camels and cattle ahead as a gift — well, really, it’s a bribe. A bribe whose message to his brother was, “Please don’t kill me.” Even with these precautions, Jacob was worried, and finally he decided the only way he could protect his family was to send them to the other side of the river, and he waited to face whatever was coming—whatever he had coming to him—alone.

Jacob cannot buy his way out this time. He was stuck. In front of him was Esau. Behind him was his past; the lies, the deception, the stolen blessing; the home he left behind. It is nighttime and Jacob was alone on the banks of the Jabbok. The Jabbok is more than just a river. It is a lonely place, a dark place, a place of struggle and wrestling.

Jacob was afraid, waiting for the conflict to come. Instead of his brother’s army, which was still some distance away, he was faced with a strange figure who emerged out of the darkness. We don’t know who this man was, or how the wrestling match started. Knowing what we know about Jacob’s temperament it would be easy to assume that he, afraid in the dark, lashed out at this messenger. We do know that they wrestled all night long.

Jacob would not let go of this man. They seemed to be a pretty even match in physical strength, but also well-matched for tenacity, for stubbornness, for unwillingness to concede, for their

single-minded determination to see this thing through, whatever it was. The man even managed to dislocate Jacob's hip, but Jacob continued hanging on for dear life. Finally, the man said 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

Jacob was tenacious, he was a fighter and he wouldn't give up until he got what he wanted. The problem was, Jacob had never really wanted the right thing before. While Abraham was concerned with the promise of God, his grandson Jacob was only concerned with the blessings of God and these are very different things.

The Promise of God to Abraham had to do with a relationship between God and humanity. God promised Abram, before he was renamed Abraham, that he would father nations who would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Abram's promise from God was a promise that would encompass all of humanity, not just Abram himself. At this Abram picked up his family and said to God 'Lead the way, we will follow.'

But the Blessing of God that Jacob sought was about physical earthly matters. His whole life had thus far been an exercise in grasping at what belonged to others for himself. His concern was for his inheritance, his wives, his herds. The promise that was part of his inheritance, that he was part of a family and a people who were to be a blessing to all the nations, doesn't seem to have registered with Jacob at all. Jacob served Jacob first.

A couple of chapters before this morning's reading Jacob had a vision of a great ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending, and at the top was the Lord himself who spoke directly to Jacob. Jacob's response to this vision, and the word of the Lord which told him that he would possess the land on which he was lying was to say 'If you will be with me, and watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I will return safely to my father's house then the Lord will be my God and this stone I have set up as a pillar will be God's house and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'

What we notice about Jacob's response is that he was focused primarily on food, clothing and safety for himself. If he got what he wanted, then the Lord would be his God. In return, he promised to build an altar and give back to God a tenth of what God had given him to him.

It was all physical, material – give and take, bartering, trading – and not even a good trade at that, giving God a tenth of what God gave him. Jacob was tenacious, he was determined, he was a fighter, but for all the wrong things. He fought only for himself, for his own benefit. Even in this all night wrestling match, he was hanging on for a blessing, and for him a blessing is measured in food, clothing and security.

This is not to say that we should have no concern for material things. Our gospel reading this morning is about Jesus providing food to a hungry crowd. Jesus had compassion on the people who had followed him far from home and who had no supplies. It is true that he later chastised

those same folks for only following him because of the miracle of the loaves and fish, but Jesus recognized that though we cannot live on bread alone, without bread we cannot live.

We do have material concerns, it is not a bad thing to work for physical things such as food, a decent house, or a reliable vehicle. But Jacob was concerned only for these material things, and only for his own comfort and security.

So Jacob fought with this man. He had earlier stolen the blessing of his father from his brother, and this time he meant to seize a blessing from this stranger by force.

So Jacob fought hard - unrelentingly. All night long, as the stars wheeled slowly across the heavens, the two men struggled and finally the stranger relented and gave Jacob a blessing that was unexpected. He first asked him 'What is your name?' And then said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

We've seen this kind of thing before in the bible – when people have an encounter with the living God, they get a new name to reflect their new life. It happened with Jacob's grandfather Abram who became Abraham. We see it in the New Testament where Simon becomes Peter, Levi changed to Matthew, Saul became Paul – in Revelation we are told that each of us will be given a white stone with our new name on it.

With this new name, Jacob became Israel who fathered twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of the nation Israel. He was now a new man, not the old man, and his life was changed. He was to go home, home to his father's land, home to his father's God.

I wanted so desperately for the new Israel to be a perfect man – it would be the right ending for this sermon – that if we seek God and hold onto him, he will make us into a new person, all our faults will be gone and we will live out the rest of our lives as saints – a beacon of hope to others. That's the ending I wanted, and it's the ending I tried to write – I spent hours and hours, pages and pages going after that happy ending – I was wrestling for hours with the text - but in the end, that's not the way Israel's story is recorded in the bible.

He did get off to a decent start – he put his wives and children and herds behind him as he approached his brother the next morning – thinking of their safety more than his own. He showed humility towards his brother, who then forgave him. He even referred to himself as his brother's servant – though the prophesy said that the older brother would serve the younger, and he seemed to have renounced some of his worldly greed – insisting his brother keep the generous peace offering of goats, camels and cattle even though Esau tried to give them back.

But this new good Israel didn't even last for the length of the conversation, for when his brother invited him to return with him to their father's land, the old Jacob resurfaced and started making excuses. He told his brother that because he had all his family and animals that he travels slowly – and so he sent his brother on ahead, saying that he would arrive shortly behind him.

What he ends up doing is settling in Canaan and allowed his family to intermarry with the Canaanites. His mother's last words to him when he ran from home so many years before after cheating his brother were 'Under no circumstances marry a Canaanite, it would break my heart if you do.' Inevitably, after intermarrying with the foreigners, his family picked up their customs and started to worship the foreign gods. Eventually Israel and his family end up on the run again because his sons have the same temper that Jacob has.

God had to appear to him twice more – once to remind him to return to the land that he was given when he had the vision of the ladder to heaven, and a second time to remind him that he was no longer Jacob, but Israel – God had to remind him of his new identity.

As much as I wanted it to be so, the truth is that Jacob didn't become a mighty man of God once he had his new name. But just as the man that Jacob wrestled ended up giving him a much better blessing than what Jacob was seeking, this text has a much better truth to offer us than the one I was looking for.

You see, Jacob/Israel was constantly forgetting about God. He kept forgetting about the land that God promised, he kept forgetting that he was the father of a nation, he forgot about the promises made to his grandfather, that his children were to be a blessing to the nations.

I can see myself in this picture, and maybe you can see yourself in Jacob as well. Scripture tells us that we are a new creation, yet we often forget. Whenever I have an experience of being in the presence of God I'm just like Jacob – I start off strong then very quickly I begin to forget, I begin falling back into my old ways: forgetting the promises, forgetting the experience of being with God, thinking only of myself, what I'm going to eat, what I'm going to wear.

But here's the amazing thing that this text revealed to me. Though I forget who I am in Christ, as Jacob forgot the identity given to him by God, God does not forget. Jacob was on his way home, then went the opposite way of where he should have gone – he can't even remember where home is. God came back, reminded him where he was supposed to be. God acted, and made sure that Jacob could not feel comfortable or safe in Canaan. God kept coming back to tell him – you are not that old man anymore – you are a new man – you are Israel because that's what I named you. That's who I created you to be.

The truth is that Jacob wasn't very faithful.

I am not very faithful.

Many of you sitting here this morning may be hearing these words and feeling the same way. We start off with good intentions of going to the place God has prepared for us, but we see the fertile land and the pretty girls of Canaan and we get distracted.

The Hebrew bible is story after story that gives this same message – God's people are consistently inconsistent – we are not faithful to the God who gives us life and to the Lord whose name we bear.

We are not faithful.

But God is faithful.

God is constant, God is consistent. Just as God kept returning to Jacob, God will keep returning to us, to remind us of our new name, our new identity, our new life.

That constancy is shown in the most explicit way imaginable through Jesus. Jesus was faithful, Jesus was obedient – up to the point of death and even beyond. The faith of Jesus, who trusted his Father even as he felt his father's presence being veiled while he was on the cross crying out about his abandonment – this faith of Jesus is the foundation of our own meagre faith.

The constancy of the God who kept returning to call his people even as they, time and time again, rejected Him is the message of the Hebrew bible. The constancy of Jesus who continued to minister to the throngs of people even as they rejected him is the message of the Newer Testament.

This constancy extended even through death, so that after Jesus was killed in the ultimate act of rejecting and forsaking God, he returned as the resurrected Messiah. He didn't return with words of condemnation, but with a final message of hope 'Lo, I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age.'

This is the faithfulness of God. This is the *pistis christou*, which appears so frequently in the letters of Saint Paul. Our faith is found in Christ.

And so, knowing that God is faithful, we are able to join with the Psalmist who writes:

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.
As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.