

## Narrative Lectionary: Jacob Wrestles God, September 22, 2019

We were at my niece's wedding last week in California. The bride was 40, and the groom 41. They already have two kids and a house. But they were finally ready to make the commitment of marriage to each other. I've been out of touch with my niece for some years, and I didn't know all the back-story.

But those two stood in front of each other and in front of us and alluded to some of the challenges along the way that brought them to this point. There have been some rocky times. But now, the bride said in front of us all, I am ready to say the word forever. And the groom said, I've always loved you, but now I'm ready to be committed. It was as if they had had to wrestle with their relationship, and they were coming up to the altar with the battle scars to prove it.

We have a story today about somebody wrestling with God. But Jacob isn't just wrestling with God, he's wrestling with his brother, he's wrestling with his past, he's wrestling with his conscience. I met with a group of women for our Bible study on Wednesday morning, and a group of folks at our pub talk the other night, and we looked at this text, and I heard some stories of the ways we have had to wrestle with God, and when we do that, we come away changed; we come away with a limp. Maybe we come away with a new identity.

Now, here's your Sunday morning quiz to find out how we got from last week's reading to this week's. Help me out: 1. God promised Abraham and Sarah- A. that they would have as many kids as the stars in the sky B. not have children, but not have as many worries, either.

2. Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac married Rebekah. When she was pregnant with twins, she discovered that A. the twins were struggling within her; B. she had a craving for figs

3. When they were older, Esau, the older brother, sold his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for A. a pot of lentils B. tickets to the latest movie: "My Big Fat Moabite Wedding"

4. When Jacob cheats his brother out of the blessing, he flees to another country, where he marries A. one wife and has three children B. Two wives and has six children C. four wives and has twelve children

So now he is still in a far country, and in a dream, God says, Go back home, back to the country I promised to your grandpa Abraham.

So Jacob sets out for Canaan. It's been twenty years, and he's not sure how is going to be received by his brother Esau. So he sends a messenger ahead of him, saying to Esau, I've been staying with our uncle. I am now a wealthy man. I'm coming home, and I hope you will welcome me.

The messenger comes back, and he says, Well, I didn't see any welcome home banners. And Esau is coming your way with 400 men. Jacob is rather distressed about this, and so he divides his people and his flocks into two companies, thinking that if Esau kills one group, the others will escape. By the way, as somebody said Wednesday night, he is making an assumption, isn't he? He is assuming his brother Esau is out to get revenge. I've gotten in trouble for making assumptions. This person is behaving this way because I did something. And yet it is so hard to read people's minds and motivations. Maybe you're better at it than I am. I have found it more productive to be clear about who I am and what my priorities are, and then let people be who they are, without making assumptions.

But Jacob makes an assumption, and he is afraid, and he decides maybe a prayer would be good. I know I pray more when I'm afraid. Jacob prays, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good.' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love that you have shown your servant, for with only my staff I crossed the Jordan (he means 20 years ago); and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'" (Genesis 32: 9-12)

Here's the paraphrase: Uh, God, you're the One who said it was ok to go back to my country. You've been way better to me than I deserved. But I'm asking you to come through now and keep me safe from my brother.

But Jacob is going to give God a little bit of help. He divides his flocks and herds of camels and goats and cows and donkeys into groups, and begins to send them

ahead of him, with a message: These are a gift for you, dear brother Esau! Take these animals! I don't know if you have ever tried to manipulate people; I have. That's what Jacob is up to here.

So that brings us up to the present story. This is the night before Jacob is going to meet his brother. He doesn't know what's going to happen, but he is afraid. He sends his wives and children across the Jabbok River, and then fords his way back to be alone with his thoughts. It's dark; the future is uncertain.

You've been through times like that. Something was coming at you. You were afraid. You didn't know what the future held. Maybe life feels like that now. And sometimes in those lonesome nights, we wrestle with ourselves; we wrestle with our choices; we wrestle with God.

On this particular night, a man appears and begins to wrestle with Jacob. Sometimes this figure is depicted as an angel. But whoever this is, this is God's presence in physical form. Notice that God doesn't come as a ray of light, a shining presence that says, It'll be ok, Jacob. No, God comes to wrestle with Jacob. Think about what wrestling is: it's an intimate contact sport. It's close contact; it's personal; it's competitive. God gets personal here with Jacob. And God could have ended this in seconds. God lets it go on all night. God says, OK, throw me your struggles, throw me your questions, throw your challenges, give me your best shot.

And of course God wrestles with Jacob because that's what Jacob knows! Jacob has wrestled his whole life! He wrestled with his twin brother in the womb; he wrestled away the birthright and the blessing. He wrestled with his father-in-law. So of course God says, Let's wrestle. God comes to Jacob in a form that Jacob can understand. This is incarnational on God's part. God comes in a way we can understand. That's why ultimately we know what God is like as we look at Jesus.

The struggle goes on all night. And the divine being cannot prevail against Jacob. Isn't that interesting? Jacob is strong; Jacob is angry; Jacob is afraid; Jacob has questions; Jacob is going to keep wrestling. So to gain an advantage, this divine being touches Jacob on the thigh, and puts his hip socket out of joint. But Jacob still won't let go, so the angel says, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking," a sign of how old this story is, because it assumes that spiritual beings cannot stand the light of day.

Still Jacob will not let this being go. He says, I will not let you go, unless you bless me. So the spiritual being says, What is your name? You would think that this divine being knew Jacob's name, but I believe he wanted Jacob to *say* his name. After all, his name meant, "the one who grabs by the heel," or "the one who takes the place of someone else." The angel says, You've had this identity for a long time. You've been the one who cheated your family time and again, you took advantage of your brother and your father and your father-in-law. That's been your identity. So the divine being says, Remind me of that name of yours?

And God says, I'm going to give you a new name. I'm going to give you a new identity. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Israel means, "the one who strives with God." You now shall be called "the one who wrestles with God."

So Jacob says, All right, you have given me a new name; what is *your* name? And the divine being says, Why is it that you ask my name? He doesn't tell Jacob what his name is, but he does better than that. He blesses him. Out of all this wrestling come a new name and a blessing! I love that about Jacob. He won't let God go until he wrings a blessing out of God.

Jacob calls the place, Peniel, which means, the face of God, because he says, I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved. And in a great image, the sun rises on Jacob as he limps away towards a new day when he will meet his brother.

What an image, Jacob walking away with a limp as a new day rises. I feel like I wrestle with life a lot. I wrestle with the injustice I see in the world. I wrestle with a world where babies are born addicted to drugs and young women are trafficked and where God's children have to leave their homelands because of violence or climate change. And yes, we wrestle with God. And that wrestling takes a toll on us. We walk away with a limp. But we walk away into a new day. We remember the battles. They have changed us, we have the scars, but we walk into a new day with God's presence to guide us.

I love that Jacob gets a new name in this story. You know, sometimes we get identities attached to us. Jacob was the one who "grabs by the heel." Maybe we consider ourselves the failure in the family; we are the clumsy one, or the not-so-

bright one, we're the least-likely-to-succeed-one. And we internalize this and say, Well, I guess that's me. And God comes along and wrestles with us, and says, That's not your name. You are a loved child of God. That is your most fundamental identity.

You need to know how this story ends. Jacob heads out limping into a new day, not knowing what's going to happen. He sees Esau coming towards him with 400 men, so he gets strategic again. He puts his maids and their children out in front, then he places his favorite wife Leah and her children behind them, and he places his beloved wife Rachel and their son Joseph last. And then he leads the parade to meet his brother. He bows to the ground seven times as he approaches Esau.

And what does Esau do? He runs to meet his brother! God has been working in Esau's life- Esau has let the past go- He embraces Jacob, and kisses him, and these brothers weep together. When Esau looks up and sees the women and children, he says, Who are these with you? as if to say, Brother, introduce this good-looking family to me! He meets everybody (Hi, I'm your brother-in-law! I'm your uncle!) And then he asks Jacob, What did you mean by sending all of these flocks ahead of you? Jacob says, I wanted to find favor with you.

Esau says, I've got enough, brother. Keep what you have. But Jacob insists, and he says these wonderful words: "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from your hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God- since you have received me with such favor." (Genesis 33:10)

What a wonderful phrase: seeing your face is like seeing the face of God. Remember we can be the face of God for somebody, when we show compassion and mercy and love and forgiveness. Jacob has wrestled with God, and he's got a new identity. He's now moving into the future with a limp, but he's moving ahead with God's blessing. And when we become reconciled with God, God asks us to reconcile with others. When God allows us to be reconciled with somebody with whom we've been estranged, it is like seeing the face of God. I have experienced that.

I am reminded of Paul's words in the Second Letter to the church in Corinth: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself

through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (2 Cor. 5:17-19)

And look at the change that God had worked in Esau’s heart! Esau had been terribly hurt by his brother, but he had decided to let it go. I don’t think he forgot, but he forgave. He didn’t want to keep dragging the pain and the hurt around with him. He decided to let Jacob back in his life. We can’t always do that. Sometimes we need to make boundaries with other people. We can’t always reconcile. But that’s the goal. God is always working in creation to bring those things that have been separated back into unity. And God insists on using imperfect people like Jacob, and like you and like me to accomplish that goal.

You were given a little piece of string with a knot in it when you came in this morning. I’d like you to let that represent a relationship that needs reconciliation. When you come up for communion, place it in the basket near the altar rail. Give it to God. And then invite the Spirit’s work in reconciling that relationship. Amen.