

Gracious Struggle
Genesis 32:22-31
August 27, 2023
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(sub for Rev. Sarah Wiles)

²² Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. ²³ He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. ²⁴ But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. ²⁵ When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

²⁷ He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."

²⁹ Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. ³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." ³¹ The sun rose as Jacob passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh.

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This is such a strange story. It's just nine verses, and it's straightforward enough on one level: Jacob is sleeping alone, and a stranger comes and wrestles with him all night. At daybreak they have an exchange where Jacob receives a blessing, a new name, and an injury. He limps off as the sun rises. End scene.

Simple enough. But it only takes a moment's thought for the questions to start piling up.

Is this a dream? Or a vision?

If it's a dream, why does he end up with a limp?

Was it a real flesh and blood person that Jacob was wrestling with? Who was it? Interpreters have considered almost every possible answer. Was it a stranger? Someone out to rob him? But the story seems to say it was more than that. Was it Esau? Or did Jacob dream the whole thing and his limp is a psychosomatic symptom of an internal struggle with himself? Or was he wrestling with a supernatural presence—a demon, or an angel, or God Almighty?

And what's with his new name, Israel? Even the meaning of that isn't really clear. It means something about struggling and overcoming. It may mean God prevails, or it may mean the one who prevails over God, or maybe the one who struggles with God, or maybe God struggles.

At last, the stranger gives Jacob the blessing he so desperately wanted, and the sun rises, and the stranger... disappears? And Jacob hobbles off with a very real limp.

I've been turning this story over and over in my head this week like a worry stone. I've rubbed it when I've found myself frustrated, in conflict, or disagreeing with friends. It was in the back of my mind when a colleague texted with news of a traumatic death in her congregation. I've thought about it at the end of the day when things are finally quiet, and in the morning when I got up while it was still dark.

With a story like this, it can be a form of prayer to simply hold it in mind and see what else the Spirit brings to mind—some moment of conflict, or struggle, exhaustion or fear, a new identity that is being born after long labor, an old injury that still aches when it rains. Pause for a minute and just hold this wrestling, uncomfortable, aching story in your mind. See what comes up.

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This is one of the gifts of the Bible. It has some stories that can haunt us, and in that haunting become a prayer.

I don't want to drain the life out of it by searching for easy morals, because I think one of the most powerful things about this story is the un-resolved quality of it. It's not tied up with a bow. There's no peaceful, easy feeling here.

We all know that having a spiritual life doesn't guarantee peaceful, easy feelings. We know that, but we forget it, too.

We get discouraged and think if only I had a stronger faith, I wouldn't be so anxious. If only I were a better Christian, these conflicts would sort themselves out. If only I were more spiritual or more in touch with God, I'd have less stress, or more serenity, or something. Then, when we experience conflict in our inner lives, we think that's a flaw, something that needs to be fixed.

But Jacob's experience here paints a different picture. For him, this wrestling, if it is God or a messenger of God with whom he's wrestling, isn't a sign of a failing spiritual life. It's a sign of vibrancy. The struggle isn't a detour on the way to a vital spiritual life. It's a sign of that very vitality.

God doesn't just work through quiet moments with a cup of green tea and chirping birds at daybreak. God also works through wrestling matches, long fights, deep anxiety, and sheer exhaustion.

This isn't just true of our inner lives, either. It can also be true of our interpersonal lives. Whatever and whoever Jacob is wrestling with, the struggle in some way seems like it must be connected with his meeting the next day with his brother, a meeting that he seems to both long for and dread.

We might wish that God would just work through best friends, and sweet, kind spiritual teachers who are models of peace and harmony. But it seems that God also works through long-estranged brothers, and people who frustrate us to no end and who draw us into conflict.

The temptation, often, is to try to smooth things out, find a quick resolution—whether it's an internal conflict or external. Here, though, we see that something is gained in the struggle, in the hanging in there and the persistence and the refusal to just let go. I picture Jacob and this stranger at the end of the night, just before dawn breaks, hanging on to each other like two

boxers who are too exhausted to keep punching. From the ashes of this exhausting, demanding, consuming struggle, something new was born.

Jacob himself was made new. Although, it wasn't without injury.

I can't let go of this image of Jacob limping off-screen as the sun peaks over the horizon.

He's received a blessing. He's been given a new name. But it wasn't without cost.

In this struggle Jacob is somehow both damaged and made more whole.

He lost something. At the very least he lost the ability to walk as easily as he once did. But I wonder what else he may have lost in this night of wrestling. Maybe he lost some of his belief that he could always get his way if he were just smart enough. Maybe he lost some of his pride.

I wonder if his new weakness was accompanied by a more tender heart. I wonder if his limp reminded him of his own humanity, if it made him ease up a bit on himself and everyone around him. I wonder if it made him more ready to reconcile with Esau the next morning.

I wish that grace always came with quiet music, soft breezes, and a general sense of wellbeing. But it seems that just as often grace arrives like an unwelcome visitor on the doorstep, bringing conflict, turmoil, nights of wrestling, stomachaches, old injuries, and topics we'd rather avoid.

It can be a powerful spiritual practice to get in the habit of asking, what gift is being offered? In the fight that never ends, what is the gift that is being offered? In the middle of the night waking and worrying, what is the gift that is being offered? In the noise, in the strife, in the turmoil, what is the gift that is being offered?

I don't mean that as a dismissal of the reality of suffering or some attempt to justify suffering or say that it's good for us. God does not desire our harm. Ever. God is the Source and Giver and Sustainer of Life. Sometimes suffering is just awful and any attempt to say it's not is blasphemy. I believe it breaks God's heart as much as ours.

And at the same time, it is also true that sometimes there are gifts in the worst struggles. I once heard a woman describe it as collateral beauty. It doesn't take away the heartache or the limp. But the sun does rise. The wrestling match is not the end. It's just the beginning. For that, thanks be to God.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023