

## WOUNDED WITH A BLESSING

Romans 9: 1-5  
Genesis 32:22-31 (read during sermon)

Faith Community  
August 3, 2008

### Introduction

Jacob is not a nice person. He has a history of tricky, under-handed actions. Remember, he tricked his own father into giving him the family inheritance instead of his brother Esau? Then he duped his twin brother into selling his birthright for a pot of stew. (OK, Esau might not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer, but...). Jacob and Esau even struggled in the womb, before they were born.

Jacob has shown himself to be underhanded, slippery, and deceptive. I guess it was a hint when he was named: Jacob means heel, trickster, or over-reacher. He lived up to his name.

Since he cheated his family, his brother threatened to kill him. So Jacob has been on the lamb. He ran away to find safety. But now he feels that he needs to go back home, no matter what the consequences.

In what may be his latest scheme, he sends his wives and children ahead to his homeland. Is he waiting to see how they are received? Putting them at risk first, before he goes home himself?

Now Jacob is alone, fearing for his life. He has no one to help or defend him. It goes like this: (READ SCRIPTURE PASSAGE).

### I

Jacob has a confrontation with God, he is changed, and he limps away with a wound. Maybe you've had a confrontation with God. Like Jacob, maybe your confrontation involved your relationship with other people, some wrongs you did, or maybe it relates to personal issues – influences that have a grip on your life and are dragging you down. Maybe you've struggled directly with God about your faith – questions, doubts, or even disbelief.

Jacob is a mess. All his past activity has caught up with him. He got what he wanted, but now he has no place to go. He feels that he has to go home, has to have some kind of life, even if people are threatening him.

As he waits alone, afraid and worried, he is assaulted by God. All of a sudden he is wrestling with God in a fierce struggle. It's a wrestling match that goes on for a long time.

Sometimes when tragedy strikes our lives, or when we face difficulty, we think of it as an attack by God – wrestling with God – like Jacob out there by the Jabbok River. Over and over again I have heard people ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" We feel like we're thrown into a wrestling match with God. God doesn't send evil into our lives, but most of the time it feels like that to the person who is facing the troubles.

## II

The struggle is real – it is hard wrestling with God. God doesn't pretend to wrangle with Jacob; God, in some human form, gives everything he has. It's not that God lets Jacob win – he doesn't wrestle with one arm tied behind his back – he gives it his all. When you and I struggle with God, whether it's personal, relational, or theological, it's a real fight. We give our best; God gives his best.

When we have difficult encounters with God, it isn't always soft lights and sweet music. Sometimes it's tough wrestling with God all through the night. It's demanding; it's draining.

But through that struggle we can be changed. God can make us new, and God empowers us. I mean, if you have wrestled with God, you can take on anything or anyone! We're not the same after we've been through a wrestling match with God. We discover new insights about ourselves. We are strengthened for greater endurance.

One of my relatives was an agnostic when he came out of college – a sort of Maoist communist. I can only imagine how his parents prayed for him. A couple of decades later he was a firm Christian who took his son to church saying, "I don't want my son to be taught the Christian faith, I want him to be indoctrinated." In between those experiences there was a lot of wrestling with God. It was sometimes a fierce battle.

## III

Often when we wrestle with God we are wounded. This wrestling isn't easy and we often bear scars from it. Sometimes the struggle we have with God comes because of the wounds we have received.

I think of the parents who have lost a child and struggle with that event and its meaning for the rest of their lives, or the man who's worked for 35 years for the same company who has no pension and is let go in his sixties, or the young woman whose husband died and left her with questions of how she will survive and how she'll move forward and how she'll be both parents to her kids. If they have faith, there will probably be real wrestling with God.

Albert Schweitzer referred to those people as, "the fellowship of those who bear the marks of pain."

Like Jacob, we wrestle with the mystery of God and we are changed and strengthened, but we often walk away with a limp.

Professor Walter Brueggemann says of this wondrous story, "Jacob received the blessing he so craved. God remains God, his hiddenness intact. But Jacob is no longer Jacob, he is Israel."<sup>1</sup>

We wrestle with God. We receive a blessing, are strengthened and empowered, but sometimes we are also wounded in the process.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 269.

## Conclusion

This is an incredible story that has baffled and engaged readers for thousands of years. It tells us enough, but it is also mysterious in so many ways. Jacob is confronted by God – it's a wrestling match. Jacob demands a blessing and he gets it.

He confronts God and receives his blessing, but he also carries with him a wound from that encounter. As one Old Testament scholar has said, "When it comes to struggles in daily life, we can count on God's mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, evaluating us, and judging us. We may have to place our life at risk, knowing that the one who loses life will find it. God honors the relationship both by engaging in the struggle in the first place and by persisting in that struggle through thick and thin. The most meticulous of preparations cannot guarantee a certain shape for the future. God may break into life and force a new direction for thought and action."<sup>2</sup>

This story ends with a poignant scene where the morning sun is just barely cracking the sky and an exhausted Jacob begins his long journey home, moving toward the Jabbok River, limping as he goes. He has been through a long night of struggle with God. But he has survived. He is changed; he is stronger; he goes with far less fear.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Terence Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) p. 570.