

Journeys with Jacob:
Wrestling with God
Genesis 32:22-31
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church
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For the past three weeks, in our worship time together we have been journeying with our ancestor in the faith, Jacob.

Jacob, the one who tricked and manipulated his brother Esau out of the family blessing and inheritance. Jacob, the one who dreamed of a ladder, and discovered that God was with him, even though he didn't realize it. Jacob, the one who wanted to marry Rachel, and ended up with her older sister Leah first, and then Rachael and their maids as well. Jacob, the one whose life was a mess, but who God still used to be the father of the 12 tribes of Israel, and thus the ancestor of Jesus. Jacob the one who thought he could grab what he wanted, when he wanted it. Jacob, the one who thought he could get what he wanted, in life, by using and relying solely on his own strength and efforts. This is the Jacob we have been journeying with and today we find him wrestling with God.

It had been 20 years since Jacob had left home and had the dream about the ladder. Jacob was married now, with four wives and 12 kids. Jacob was rich, with a successful agricultural business. Jacob was happy, at least as the world determines happiness. By his own strength and effort and by his manipulations of others, Jacob had made a good life for himself. But it is now time for him to go back home. In fact, the story we hear today takes place while Jacob is on the way back home to meet his brother Esau. And Jacob has every reason to think that after all this time, Esau will forgive him. After all, it was a long time ago, and they are brothers, and Esau has his own life now too.

On Jacob's way back home, our story for today takes place. The one where Jacob wrestles with God. Wrestling with God is a serious matter and as I wrestled with this scripture this week, I found a book that I had read during my sabbatical leave. Its title is Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons. Its author, Frederick Buechner. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church, Buechner has a way with words. Time and again, I am inspired by reading his sermons and books, in part due to his gift of using compelling words and images, but mostly because his writing reminds of the transforming power that scripture stories have because they connect with our own life stories. As I read Buechner's

words, I am reminded again and again of the power of The Word to change hearts and minds and communities into the people and the world God truly intends.

Here are Buechner's words on Jacob's wrestling with God.

"Jacob wants to go home again, back to the land that God promised to Abraham, to Isaac and now to him, as a gift. A gift. God's gift. And now Jacob, who knows what he wants and what he can get and how to get it, goes back to get that gift. And I mean get and you can be sure that Jacob means it too.

When he reaches the river Jabbok, which is all that stands between him and the Promised Land, he sends his family and his servants across ahead of him, but he remains behind to spend the night on the near shore alone. One wonders why. Maybe in order to savor to its fullest achievement, this moment for which all his earlier moments have been preparing and from which only a river separates him now.

And then it happens. Out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob, and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the darkness. It is terrible enough not to see the attacker's face, and his strength is more terrible still, the strength of more than a man. All the night through they struggle in silence until just before morning, when it looks as though a miracle might happen. Jacob is winning. The stranger cries out to be set free before the sun rises. Then, suddenly, all is reversed.

He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end up this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.

The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death—the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, 'I will not let you go until you bless me!' Not a blessing he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.

Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, God demands of us everything; before giving us life, God demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them you and I? I do not know. Only remember the last glimpse we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of defeat that is victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.”

Beyond Buecher’s powerful words, we have the rest of the story of Jacob. After Jacob wrestles with God and after God blesses Jacob with a limp there is the story of the reconciliation of the brothers. Jacob and Esau do reconcile. When they finally see each other, they fall on the ground together, not to wrestle, but to forgive.

But the point of the whole story is that Jacob’s wrestling with God and reconciling with his brother Esau go together. Love of God and love of our brothers and sisters belong together. In the words of St. Paul “If anyone says ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother or sister, that person is a liar... and this is the commandment we have... that one who loves God must love one’s sister and brother also.” (I John 4:20-21) Jacob, now called Israel now has received the most wonderful blessing of being forgiven by his brother, but he is also crippled—limping for the rest of his life.

As ancestors and heirs of this man Jacob, we too must learn of God’s ways. To fully reconcile with our all of our estranged brothers and sisters, we also must encounter and even wrestle with a God who seeks to bless us. Limping, blessing and forgiveness go together—and when they do, everyone is transformed—and everyone gets a new beginning. Amen.

ⁱ Buechner, Frederick, From his Sermon “The Magnificent Defeat” as printed in Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons Harper: San Francisco: 2006 pp. 6-8