

Wrestling in the Night

Proper 24, Year C – Gen 32:3-8, 22-30, Luke 18:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 20, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

You will have noticed, of course, that the Old Testament reading you heard a moment ago was *not* the one printed on your little green bulletin insert. This time of the year, the Revised Common Lectionary has *two* Old Testament tracks, and we have been using the one that includes the printed reading from the Book of the Prophet, Jeremiah. But what with *EfM* and the *Bible Challenge*, I've been reading Genesis lately, and so when I saw in the Lectionary that one of my favorite stories had come up as a Sunday reading, I went with it. I went with it right at the beginning of the week when I normally get started mulling things over in my mind. I went with it when I was writing down some of my thoughts in the middle of the week. I went with it right to my little pint-sized camp bed at the Diocesan Youth Gathering Friday night. I went with it right up to the point late last evening when I was putting the finishing touches on this morning's sermon, and it occurred to me that this time of the year, the Revised Common Lectionary has *two* Old Testament tracks. So that's why a moment ago, instead of the reading that is printed on your little green bulletin insert, you heard one of my favorite stories from Genesis. I guess we're stuck with it.

It's the story of what has to be the most dramatic mid-life crisis in history. Somewhere just north of the River Jabbock, Jacob is locked in a wrestling hold with another man. Scholars debate up one side and down the other as to the identity of his opponent – God, an angel, some wandering Aramean with a weird obsession for athletic competition. One thing is certain, though, *Jacob* knows that he is wrestling with the Almighty One, the Most High, the God of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Jacob prays that God will give him the blessing he feels he is finally due. But his opponent meets his fervent requests with stony silence. Jacob can't overcome him, but he won't let him go, either. So as the night deepens, Jacob wrestles on, separated from the rest of his life by just a few feet of water, and an eternity of struggle.

For as long as he could remember, Jacob had had to fight for everything he got. Abraham and Isaac had been given a promise that they would become a mighty nation. From the beginning, it seemed, Jacob had been forced to *wrestle* that same promise from God for himself. Even in his mother's womb, Jacob and his twin brother Esau were fighting. Jacob was born second of the two, but when they were born, Jacob was holding Esau's foot, trying to pull him back. By taking advantage of his brother's weakness, Jacob had been able to cheat Esau out of his right to inherit their father's property. And when the time came for Isaac to pass the patriarchal blessing to his eldest son, Jacob managed to trick his father into giving *him* the blessing that should have been his brother's. That had been the final break between the two men. Jacob had found out about Esau's plans to kill him, and had taken off to live with his mother's family. One night during his frantic flight through the wilderness, Jacob saw a vision of angels ascending and descending a stairway that reached heaven – Jacob's ladder. The birthright, the father's blessing, and now the *vision* were all his.

And yet here he is, wrestling in the darkest part of the night. The moon has already set, and only the stars shine on the combatants. The stars seem too many to count. But tonight they serve only as mocking reminders of the promise God had given his grandfather Abraham. Over and over, Jacob demands that same promise from his divine opponent. Jacob holds on tightly. But tonight God is silent. No heavenly visions this night. No ministering angels. No stairway to heaven. Only aching muscles, and sweat, and darkness, and silence. Only the struggle.

When he had recovered from his vision at the place he had named Beth-el, the House of God, Jacob had picked himself up and continued to his uncle's home, sure he had found the way to God's

promise. But there, too, Jacob had had to claw and scratch for what he felt should have been his by right. Jacob worked for seven years to earn the hand of the woman he loved. Then, on the wedding night, he discovered that his uncle had substituted her older sister. So he had worked seven more years for the younger woman as well. Finally he began working for actual wages, a share of his uncle's livestock business. In order to increase his own share, Jacob had manipulated the breeding stock in his favor. When his uncle found out that his own deceit had been matched by his nephew's, Jacob had decided it was once again time to move on. In those twenty years living as an alien away from his home, Jacob had amassed quite an estate – and quite a family. By the time he left his uncle's employ, Jacob was well on the way to fulfilling the promise of God to make of Abraham and Isaac a great nation. He had family, he had power, he had wealth.

And yet here he is, wrestling in the night. The sky is beginning to lighten in the direction from which he has come, but it is still dark in the direction toward which he has set his face. Darkness still shrouds the land that he wants God to promise for his inheritance. No promised land tonight. Nowhere to graze his flocks. Nowhere to raise his children. No home but this sandy patch of desolate desert darkness. Only the combat. Only the holding on. Only the struggle.

Jacob had made the decision to return, with his cattle and servants, with his wives and with his children, to his promised homeland. Jacob had set off toward the west, toward home. But what about brother Esau? In the intervening years, Esau had *also* established himself. Word had come to Jacob that Esau had heard that his brother was heading home, and had set out to meet him – and four *hundred* men with him! Esau was no longer the bumbling big brother. He had become a man of power, and Jacob had good reason to be afraid. So Jacob had gathered together from his wealth a gift to hopefully once more slake his brother's appetite, another gift to manipulate and control his rival, a bribe to *perhaps* assuage Esau's rightful wrath. He sent his gift on ahead of him with soothing, flattering words. Then he divided his household and sent them ahead as well, one group at a time, so that maybe *half* his servants, *half* his flocks, *half* his property would survive. Finally, he sent his family. His wives and his children, the guarantees of God's promise to him, he sent to Esau's side of the river, while he himself stayed alone, and waited. Utterly alone in the gathering night, he waited for some sign of God's good favor. He waited for a sign that the route he had taken was the right one. He waited for a sign that everything would, after all, be all right. And God did appear. But instead of a blessing, Jacob heard silence.

And here he is, wrestling in the night. With the sun finally rising to end the long, dark night, Jacob is still engaged in a struggle with the Almighty. Still holding on with determination, with tenacity, with stubbornness. At Beth-el, Jacob had been promised a blessing. But here he is, no more wealth, no more power, no more family. Only the coldness and loneliness of another empty dawn. Only a God who will not answer. Only the struggle.

Like the widow in Jesus' parable in this morning's Gospel, Jacob thought that if he fought hard enough, if he wrestled tenaciously enough, if he held on long enough, he could *force* God to give him what he thought he deserved. But Jacob wasn't dealing with some judge who just didn't care, who would give anything just to get some bothersome old woman out of his hair. It's easy to look at this story and think how marvelous it was that Jacob hung on – that like the widow, he stood his ground until God finally came around to *his* point of view.

Our *own* dealings with God often have the same character. Our stealing from our brother may not involve tribal hierarchy or patriarchal birthright. Our deception in the work place may not involve selective livestock breeding. Our willingness to betray others to advance our own position may not involve sending cattle, servants and children out on point to save our own skins. But we all try to wrestle with God on our own terms, don't we? In our prayers, we try to control God, to force him into doing what we want, when we want. We pray as if God is some sort of cosmic Pez dispenser, dispensing goodies at the touch of a button. And we end up wondering where the answers are. We hold on, and we wrestle and we struggle. Maybe we get confused, wondering why it just doesn't seem to work. Maybe we get bitter that God doesn't seem to answer. Maybe we just eventually let go, give up the fight, let the prayer go unsaid.

But be sure you understand *this*. In the wrestling match between God and Jacob, it was not *God* who changed. All night long, Jacob grappled with the Lord on his own terms. But in the end, the matter is settled on *God's* terms. As the sun finally comes up on a new day, it is *Jacob* who is changed. After holding on to the Almighty, he is no longer Jacob the cheater, Jacob the thief, Jacob the usurper, he is *Israel*, the father of God's chosen people.

Like Jacob, we often get so caught up in wanting and demanding our answers, that we miss the fact that the answer is *in* the struggle. The story is in the telling of it. The blessing is in the *living* of the promise. The answer in *all* our struggles, the answer even in God's sometimes seeming silence, isn't, "wait" – it's, "keep asking," it's, "stay engaged," it's, "keep wrestling." The answer to our prayer, is in the praying... and in the praying... and in the praying. As we continue to bring our needs into God's presence, as we become engaged in genuine *conversation* with our Creator, as we persistently call upon our Sustainer, as we wrestle with our Redeemer through even our darkest nights, it is *we* who are changed.

We're stuck with it, you and I. And our God is stuck with *us*. Don't let go. Don't let go.