

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Faithful Wrestling

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

While I typically focus on the Gospel texts in my preaching and use the other appointed texts as support, this week I'm going to be focusing more on the Hebrew Bible text from Genesis. This narrative about Jacob's encounter with God is one of my favorite stories in the Hebrew Bible, and one of my favorites in all of scripture. Mostly because it makes a powerful statement about the life of faith.

This text can be a little confusing at times, and it is not made clearer by many of the traditions that have grown up around it. The text itself introduces Jacob's wrestling partner as "a man," but given the blessing bestowed and the name that Jacob will assign the location, it is implied that his wrestling was with God. Over the years it seems as though many Christians have had a difficult time with this possibility and you will find many references in the Christian tradition to Jacob wrestling with an angel instead. If you watch the announcement slides in the Gathering Space this morning you will see several pieces of artwork that depict this tradition.

While the thought that Jacob would somehow be able to wrestle God to a draw seems unbelievable, I think focusing on that leads many to miss the forest for the trees. So let's step back a moment and consider the wider context of this narrative...the forest if you will.

This encounter occurs on the border of the promised land. This likely signifies a transitional experience. We should not be surprised to find Jacob encountering God here as he is about to re-enter the promised land. After all, when he was fleeing his brother's wrath back in Genesis 28 he encounters the divine in his dream of a great ladder reaching up to heaven as he is about to leave the promised land.¹ God often seems to meet people in times of

¹ Genesis 28:10-17

transition; almost as though such times are ripe with new possibilities and the potential for great changes.

We should also consider the journey that Jacob is on when he has this encounter. He is not just returning to the land of his birth, but he is also returning to face his brother Esau. And as far as Jacob knows, despite being gone for 21 years, Esau is still angry enough to want to kill him. The last he heard of Esau was in Genesis 27, “Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’ But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you.’”² So Jacob is returning to his brother to deal with the repercussions of his actions as the “heel-grabber” or “usurper” (which is what the name Jacob means in Hebrew).³ And what was the crux of his conflict with Esau? The **blessing** of their father, Isaac.

Before making his bed for the night Jacob sends his wives and children, his servants, and all the wealth he earned (and conned) from Laban across the river Jabbok to protect it all. He remains apart, utterly alone and likely full of anxiety about his coming confrontation with his brother. And it is in the midst of all of this that a mysterious figure pounces upon him and forces him to wrestle all night long. There, a few more trees that might help us to see more of the forest of what’s going on here.

So what is this wrestling all about? Given the context I wonder if it’s not a matter of wrestling with God about all that’s going on in his life: transitions, fear, anxiety, birthrights, blessings, relationships, conflict...and perhaps most of all...identity. Jacob has been a trickster figure, a supplanter, a usurper since his very birth. He’s stolen a blessing from his brother, a blessing to do with a land and descendants, with abundance and authority. Despite all that he was forced to flee from his home. At this point he’s been away for 21 long years...is he the same man who fled from this land? Is he the same man who conned his brother, deceive his father, and swindled his uncle? Who is he? And who is the God who has been with him throughout all of this? Who is the God whom his father invoked in his blessing? I guess my theory is that more

² Genesis 27:41-42 (NRSV)

³ עִקֵּב noun, masculine, meaning heel, footprint, hinderpart. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, Unabridged, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc.

than wrestling with God during this long and dark night of his soul, Jacob is just as much wrestling with himself.

Have you ever had to wrestle with yourself about who you are? Have you ever looked around and wondered how you got to where you are? Have you ever struggled with expectations, both your own and those of others, regarding your identity? I hope you have. Such wrestling is important! Such reflection is a big part of the mirror-work I keep encouraging you all (and myself) to do. And I think this is the way in which we wrestle with God too. Or at least wrestling with who God created us, and is persistently calling us, to be.

Jacob spends all night wrestling with God and in the end God blesses him in the most peculiar way. He changes his name. But it's more than just a name change, God is bestowing upon him a new identity. Or, as you've heard from me a lot lately, God is telling Jacob who God created him to be. God created Jacob to be one who strives with God and with others. God created him to be the recipient of God's promises to Abraham and Isaac before him. God created him to be this clever, stubborn, wily, contentious, younger twin of Isaac and his beloved Rebekah. God created him to be the father of the twelve tribes, the founder of a nation.

But the wrestling doesn't end there. I find it fascinating that despite his name and identity being changed by God, he is still most often referred to as Jacob in the chapters that follow. He will occasionally be called Israel, but by and large his new identity is not highlighted. Almost as though there remains some tension in him, a lingering conflict between the old and the new. Almost as though identity is constantly being formed and changed and we often struggle to live into who God created us to be. Wrestling with God seems to be a life-long endeavor.

God is stubborn and persistent in remaining in relationship with us even when we rebel and try to run away. God loves us too much to ever truly let us go. God is constantly calling us back into relationship, reminding us of who we were created to be. Calling us back to the Way of Christ, the path of faithful wrestling with God, and with ourselves. I get the feeling God welcomes faithful wrestling. God wants us to be as stubborn and persistent as God is. God knows we often mistake ourselves and live in ways that we were not created to live.

God calls us to engage, again and again, with all the forces that try to split us off from God. Both the external and internal forces. God holds us, encourages us, and equips us to wrestle with those things that try to force us into life that is not true life. God is with us when we need to persistently insist on justice for ourselves or for others. God is with us when we confront our own warped sense of identity. We wrestle with God and we wrestle with the forces that defy God. We wrestle with God and we wrestle with ourselves. And throughout it all God is there, blessing us and remaining with us no matter the conflict or tension or fear. God is there, claiming us and showing us who we truly are.

So don't be afraid to wrestle with God. If nothing else, it means we're still in relationship. And we certainly see God, again and again in the life and history of Israel, stubbornly holding on to a stubborn and wrong-headed people. Again and again in the preaching and teachings of Christ we find him stubbornly calling us to be who we were created to be. Pouncing on us with stubborn determination to engage us in faithful wrestling. Amen.