Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

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What's in a name?

Readings Bulletin

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak... Then the man said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'" Rather than focusing on the Widow and the Unjust Judge this morning, which I must confess, appeals to me a great deal, I want to look at our text from Genesis 32 instead. So let us turn our attention now to a man caught between his past and his future, a man whose life story is a testament to the fact that we must often fight for our own blessing: Jacob. Before he was Israel, the one who strives with God, he was Jacob, the *Supplanter*. He was a heel-grabber, a trickster, a hustler. His very name, *Ya'akov*, means "one who follows on the heel," but also "one who overreaches" or "one who cheats."

And he certainly lives up to that name! He spent his early life maneuvering, planning, and deceiving:

- He schemed with his mother Rebekah to steal his twin brother Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew.
- He impersonated Esau, wearing goatskins and lying to his blind father Isaac, to steal the patriarchal blessing.
- He fled to his uncle Laban and, over two decades, worked and schemed his way to wealth, sometimes being tricked himself, but always managing to come out ahead.

Jacob lived a life defined by running: running from the consequences of his ambition, running from his brother's rage, and perhaps, running from his true self.

Now, twenty years later, the consequences of those choices are finally catching up to him. He is returning home, rich in family and livestock, but ahead of him looms the greatest fear of his life: meeting his estranged, wronged brother, Esau, who is approaching with four hundred men. Jacob is terrified. He divides his family, sends lavish gifts ahead as appeasement, and then, he experiences something he has never known before: **He is alone.** It is in this solitude, this moment of profound vulnerability, that a divine encounter happens.

The Bible tells us that "a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Who was this man? Was it a literal messenger? Was it a guardian angel, as some ancient rabbis suggested? Was it God? Perhaps Jacob was wrestling with all these faces at once. Perhaps he was wrestling with himself, at least the version of himself he'd suppressed, the shame of his past, and the fear of his future. He was wrestling with "the supplanter," the identity he had carried his whole life. This was his dark night of the soul, where all the messiness of his life, all the questions, all the regret, and all the desperate hope came together in a primal struggle. This sacred tussle teaches us a profound truth about self-knowledge: We often come to know who we truly are, not in moments of quiet contemplation, but in moments of active, honest struggle with the Divine.

Jacob holds on. He refuses to let go until he receives a blessing. This is the importance of wrestling with God. It is not a sign of faithlessness, but rather the deepest sign of faith. It is in the pushing, pulling, arguing, and demanding of better, raising our voices in "holy exasperation," that we force a true encounter.

As the sun is about to rise, the figure touches Jacob's hip, and he is wounded. He is left with a permanent limp, a reminder of the struggle. But the wound is immediately followed by the blessing and the new name: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Jacob, the Supplanter, is transformed into Israel, the one who **Wrestles with God**. His new identity is not a reward for being perfect or obedient; it is a permanent mark of having *struggled* and *persisted*. His life is now defined not by his cunning schemes, but by his defiant, intimate, all-night struggle with the Holy. The limp is the permanent reminder that the blessing came through the wound. We need not consider our wounds, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, as signs of failure, but signs that we showed up to wrestle with the divine, to fight for our own transformation.

All of this means that if you are questioning, if you are struggling with doubt, if you are angry at injustice, or if you feel a deep tension between the self you are and the self you are called to be, you are standing on holy ground. This wrestling often involves the same challenges that Jacob faced:

- Confront Your Past: Like Jacob, we must confront the "Supplanter" within us: the fear, the deception, the ego, the patterns of harm that we still carry. This self-confrontation is a prerequisite for self-knowledge.
- Embrace the Conflict: Stop seeing doubt and struggle as barriers to faith. See them as an invitation to deepen your faith. God meets us, not when our lives are neat and tidy, but when we are alone, afraid, and fighting for a blessing.
- Expect a Wound: Transformation is not painless. The wrestling leaves us with a limp. Your new, truer self will carry the scars of the struggle. These scars become holy reminders of our experience wrestling.

The story ends not just with a name change, but with a new perspective. The next day, Jacob faces Esau. When he sees his brother's face, Jacob says, "to

see your face is like seeing the face of God." Having wrestled with the Divine in the shadow of the night, Jacob can now see the Divine reflected in the face of his estranged human brother. This is the great work: to wrestle with God until we know ourselves, and in knowing ourselves, to find the grace to see God in the world around us. May we all have the courage to wrestle through the long night. Amen.