



“Wrestling as a Spiritual Practice”

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Genesis 32: 22–32 (NRSV)***

The book of Genesis is a collection of etiologies. (Etiologies are stories about how things began.) The oldest creation story known to the Judeo-Christian faith is found in chapter one, beginning with the first verse. A second creation story, the one about Adam and Eve, follows in chapter two. The story of Noah and the Ark (which is found in chapters 6–8) describes the origin of rainbows, among other things. The Tower of Babel (found in chapter 11) explains why there are so many languages in the world, and why different peoples don’t always get along.

The genealogical narratives of Ancient Israel’s patriarchs and matriarchs fill the remaining chapters in the book of Genesis, in chronological order. Abraham and Sarah, Israel’s first parents, make their appearance here. God establishes a covenant with them and promises to make a great nation out of their descendants. In their old age, God blesses Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac, who grows up and marries Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah give birth to twin sons, Esau and Jacob, who had a complicated relationship, which is described in this book.

Through today’s scripture reading we learn about a particular twist their relationship took and about the origins of the name “Peniel” (the place where Jacob wrestled), and the origin of the name “Israel” (for Jacob’s descendants). If we open our pew Bibles and look at the larger narrative in which today’s story is situated and read on to the end of chapter 32, we see an explanation of the origins of an ancient Jewish dietary custom, which explains that because of Jacob’s struggle and hip injury, Jews were forbidden to eat the thigh muscle of an animal.¹

Fascinating as these cultural artifacts may be, they are secondary in importance to the Jacob narrative as a whole.

¹ Fred Craddock, et al. *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994), p. 442.

II

As you may remember from your Sunday School lessons, Esau and Jacob were arch rivals. Their rivalry was fueled by jealousy and competition. Esau, the older of the twins (by just a few minutes), was his father's oldest son, and heir apparent to his father's estate and to a higher rank among the patriarchs of Israel than his brother, Jacob.

Jacob coveted the things that Jewish law said rightfully belonged to his brother, Esau; and as the story goes, he tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessings and the worldly goods and that, by Jewish law, were intended for his twin brother, Esau.

Despite the dishonest means by which Jacob acquired his wealth and position, no one but Esau contested the outcome. Isaac had made a promise. His word was his bond. What was said was done.

When Esau realized that his father would not overturn his decision, Esau swore that he would murder Jacob. (And you thought that your family had trouble getting along.)

Were it not for the shrewd intervention of the twins' mother, Rebekah, Esau would probably have succeeded with his plan. Rebekah went to her husband, Isaac, and insisted that he send Jacob to her brother's house ostensibly to search for a wife. Isaac granted Rebekah's wish, and Jacob was sent on his way.

One night, on Jacob's journey to his Uncle Laban's home in Haran,² he had a dream in which a ladder was lowered from the sky and angels ascended and descended on it between heaven and earth. In the dream, God spoke to Jacob reiterating the promise made to his grandfather, Abraham, telling him that God would make of his people a great nation, and saying that they would inhabit the very land on which Jacob then slept.

When Jacob awoke from his dream, he was refreshed and ready to continue to his uncle's home where he was warmly welcomed. Jacob soon fell in love with Rachel, his Uncle Laban's youngest daughter, and asked for the right to marry her. Laban agreed to the marriage provided that Jacob served as his shepherd for seven years. Jacob did as Laban required, but at the end of the seventh year, instead of presenting his youngest daughter for marriage as he had promised Jacob, Laban presented his oldest daughter, Leah. Laban told Jacob that he could not allow his younger daughter to marry before the older one had found a husband.

² Ancient Haran was located in northwest Mesopotamia.

Jacob was unhappy with Laban's decision, but in those days and in that culture, the younger generation did not contradict the decisions of their elders. Jacob accepted Laban's decision; he married Leah, and agreed to work another seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel. Finally, at the end of fourteen years of service, Laban consented to the marriage of Jacob and Rachel.

Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel, continued to live in Haran, and Jacob continued to serve as a shepherd for Laban, so that he could acquire a sheep and goat herd of his own. Eventually, when he was satisfied with his earnings, Jacob decided to return to Canaan, the land of his parents, Isaac and Rebekah.

Jacob told Laban his plans and asked to be given what was owed to him. Once again, Laban cheated Jacob. The night before the herds were to be divided, and Jacob and his family were to leave, Laban sent his servants into the hills to cull Jacob's sheep and goats from the combined herd and run Jacob's livestock into a distant pasture. The next day, when Jacob went to claim what was his, the animals bearing his mark were gone.

Though Jacob had been cheated three times by Laban already, Jacob labored on, and eventually received what was owed him. Then he gathered up his family and left for home.

Like some others who have left home and stayed away for a long time, Jacob realized as he drew closer that he had some unfinished business back home with his brother, Esau, and that Esau might not welcome him with open arms. So Jacob sent scouts ahead to spy on Esau. When the scouts returned, they reported that Esau was sending 400 men to meet them. Jacob was worried. To demonstrate that he came on peaceful terms, Jacob sent his wives and children and his herd ahead of him with a peace offering of livestock for Esau.

Meanwhile, Jacob lagged behind at the River Jabbok to rest and prepare for what would surely be a most unconventional family reunion.

It is precisely at this juncture in Jacob's journey that we encounter him in today's text (Gen. 32:22-32). Here at the convergence of the Jabbok and Jordan Rivers, Jacob lies down to rest, but like so many who are living with unresolved issues in their lives, Jacob cannot sleep—at least not deeply.

He wrestles fitfully in his dreams with a mysterious being. As they keep wrestling, Jacob is struck on the hip, and his hip is dislocated. As dawn approaches, Jacob's adversary demands that he be let go. Jacob refuses unless the creature grants him a blessing. Jacob's request is granted, and a blessing is given. Jacob receives a new name, "Israel," meaning "striven with God." From that time forward, Jacob's people called themselves "Israelites," for Jacob (and they) had striven with God.

Knowing that only God could grant blessings, Jacob discerned that the one with whom he had wrestled was God. So Jacob named the place on the River Jabbok, “Peniel,” which means, “face of God.”

III

The identity of the character Jacob struggled with, and the meaning of that struggle, has fascinated scholars and believers for eons.

Literary scholars argue that the mysterious creature in Jacob’s dream was one of the ubiquitous river demons found throughout Ancient Near Eastern mythology.³

Biblical scholars tend to build on literary theory and argue that the Hebrew narrator added a nuanced meaning to the ancient myth by identifying Jacob’s adversary as God.⁴

Modern psychologists would add a further layer of interpretation to Jacob’s story. Consider the possibilities: Jacob was wrestling with unresolved issues about his father-in-law, Laban. Jacob was wrestling with guilt about cheating his brother, Esau. Or Jacob was wrestling with his own fears about going home, about facing his past, and about admitting his guilt and trying to make amends.

No matter what angle intrigues us about the story of Jacob at the Jabbok, this is a story that depicts individual and corporate strife and struggle. Jacob and the people of Israel had striven with human and divine characters, and they had survived and been blessed by God as a result.

Those who have wrestled with internal issues or “duked” it out with family members may find it easy to identify with Jacob. In our struggles—particularly in our darkest hours—the identity of the issues or people with whom we struggle may become blurred. Are we fighting with a parent, a sibling, God, the devil, or ourselves?

In times like these, Jacob’s story serves as a catharsis for our struggles. It offers encouragement to be strong and bold and hopeful even when resolution doesn’t seem to come. It also promises us that, like Jacob, we will be blessed by God during the struggle, even though we may not emerge unscathed.⁵

I may not know what each of you is wrestling with in your life, or what you have struggled with in the past, or what struggles may await you in the future, but I do know this: our greatest struggles in life often have a spiritual dimension to them, whether we recognize this aspect of them or not.

³ Craddock, p. 442.

⁴ Craddock, p. 442.

⁵ Craddock, p. 443.

In fact, our “wrestling matches” might even be a kind of spiritual discipline for us. If we face our struggles, and if we don’t give up, we can persevere in the struggle, and we may even experience a blessing, just like Jacob—even though we are changed or even wounded in the match.

Furthermore, we may discover, like Jacob—though perhaps only in hindsight—that God was with us, even in times when we may have felt that we were wrestling alone. Amen.