

Genesis 32:22-33:4

Last week we heard God promise Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would be more numerous than the stars. At the age of 90, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah, who gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older brother, giving him claim to the birthright assigned to the eldest son. Jacob, with the help of his mother, tricked Esau out of his father's blessing. Afraid that Esau, would kill him in revenge, Jacob went into exile.

While in exile, Jacob worked for Laban and married his two daughters, Leah and Rachel after working for seven years to "buy" each wife. Over the twenty years Jacob worked for Laban, he was cheated. In a dream an angel told Jacob to gather Leah and Rachel and their children and return to the land of his birth. So Jacob put his wives and children on camels, drove his livestock in front of him and set out to the land of Canaan where his father, Isaac, lived.

Jacob outwitted Laban, setting out secretly without telling him they were leaving. He crossed the Euphrates River with all his possessions heading for the hill country of Gilead. Jacob knew that he had to put right what he had broken, his relationship with Esau. But, that night, he was not alone. The last time Jacob spent the night alone, he was in Bethel, having barely escaped Esau. With the threat behind him, God visited the sleeping Jacob promising even more blessings than those received from his father Isaac; land, progeny, protection.

On Jacob's return trip home, God again took advantage of the brief moment of solitude, a moment when Jacob was most exposed and vulnerable, to reveal God's self. But this time God came posing as a dark and disguised threat, not as a protector. He wrestled with him until

dawn began to break. Jacob hung on to him until he gave him a blessing. With the blessing, Jacob's name was changed to Israel, which means one who strives with God and prevails.

Commentators have suggested various explanations: the man is Jacob's greatest fear and rival; his brother, disguised in the dark, came to him for vengeance; it is Jacob's guilt and his own inner demons that have come calling. However, Jacob identifies this stranger to be none other than Yahweh. But is God now playing the part of the antagonist? Is God tired of being little more to Jacob than the dispenser of goodies? Is God trying to teach the patriarch-to-be a lesson about not taking divine gifts for granted? Is this a test of character or is it a test of faith?

Whatever the reason for the attack, Jacob's response is to stand his ground and face his attacker. Jacob chooses to entangle himself with this threatening form, be it Esau, his inner demons, or even Yahweh. But, Jacob's reaction is a departure from his usual reaction. He does not run away. In tangling with his attacker, Jacob foregoes the sly and indirect forms of aggression that he had cultivated as an adult. Instead of cunning evasion, he fights openly and persistently to get what he wants; a blessing, or liberation from his guilt!

Today's story provides a refreshing correction to the mistaken idea that faith is the same as passive acceptance. Here, faith is defined as the stubborn refusal to let God off the hook. This view of faith is not unique in the Old Testament. It matches the assumptions that lie behind many of the psalms of lament.

In the book of Job, Yahweh declares that Job was right to argue with God. In the New Testament, Jesus tells a parable of the woman who

nags the judge until he gives her what she wants. Then there is the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter and he tells her: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus heals her daughter because of her faith and perseverance. God rewards those who won't let go.

Today's story makes a clear connection between the figure of Jacob and the nation of Israel. As the founder of the nation of Israel, Jacob or Israel as he is now known, was the most important patriarch of the Jewish nation. Outside of the book of Genesis, Old Testament texts mention Jacob far more often than Adam and Abraham combined. He is the Israelites' most significant ancestor. Yet, Jacob is repeatedly depicted as a schemer. He tricks his brother into selling him his birthright as the eldest son. With the help of his mother, he tricks his father, Isaac into giving him his brother's blessing. He tricks Laban, his father-in-law in order to receive the wages he has earned.

These manipulations left him estranged from his family. Having left his father-in-law Laban's home, Jacob brought his large family back to this ancestral land, Canaan. However, he is afraid that his brother Esau, is seeking revenge. Jacob sends his family ahead as he prepares to face his brother alone.

As he falls asleep, he has no idea that he is at a sacred site. The story of what happens that night contains several important elements: it is the story of the founding of a sacred city, in this case "Peniel", which means "face of God". It explains why Israelites do not eat a particular part of a sacrificial animal, that tendon attached to the hip bone. Most significantly, it is the story of why God changes Jacob's name to Israel.

All Biblical names were meant to connote something about that person. So, a change in names indicated a significant change in status. Recall Naomi, whose name means “pleasantness”, changed her name to Mara which means “bitterness”, when she returned to her hometown of Bethlehem following the death of her husband and sons. Abram which meant “father departed or wandering” was changed to Abraham which means “father of many nations”.

The name “Jacob” meant “he takes by the heel”, referring to the way Esau supplanted Jacob when he was born. At this point in the story, Jacob comes into his own independent destiny. The exact meaning of the name “Israel” is debated, but the text connects it to the verb meaning “to persevere”.

The central part, most important part of the story is the mysterious wrestling match between Jacob and the unnamed enigmatic figure. This is one of several places in Genesis and Exodus where an ambiguous heavenly figure functions as a cypher for God. While later Christian tradition depicts these figures as angels, early Bible stories were not so clear. In Exodus, an angel appears in the burning bush, but that angel quickly turns out to be God speaking to Moses.

But here, the figure, is not identified as an angel, it simply says that a “man” wrestles with Jacob. Yet at the end of the passage, Jacob declares that he has seen the “face of God”. Although the encounter takes place at night, the text goes out of its way to say this was not a dream. Jacob is not sleeping when the man appears, the mysterious wrestler is a man and not an angel, and Jacob is left with a real physical injury.

The text is cryptic, simply saying that “a man wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn”. Yet, several interesting things stand out. It is night. In folk tales as well as biblical stories, the moment of dawn is an important one; the time between night and day is the perfect point to signal an epic conflict and transforming event.

The figure wrestled with Jacob until daybreak, but the mysterious personage could not overpower Jacob. The reference to daybreak was a cue to the ancient audience that the attacker was not human. The belief in antiquity was that demons and spirits inhabited the night and rivers. His purpose for attacking Jacob is undetermined. Was it his assailant’s intent just to prevent Jacob from crossing the river or to kill him? Whatever was his purpose, it appears that he was only potent at night. With the day about to break, this superhuman, it seems, would lose his power.

With no time to spare, the stranger reaches out and strikes Jacob on his hip, pulling his hip-socket out of joint while he continued to wrestle with Jacob. He repeats his plea that Jacob let him go before daybreak. Jacob replies that he will not let the unknown figure go until he blesses him.

Jacob is a superhero. First, his demand for a blessing shows that he recognizes the man as something other than a robber. Second, it is Jacob who declares that this is God. Third, rather than bow down before this figure, he wrestles him to a draw! Up to this point in the story, Jacob has never been depicted as a strong man. That is Esau’s role. We are left to conclude that Jacob survives out of determination, pure stubbornness to give in.

The bigger picture that modern readers often miss though, is that this is

really a story about Israel and God. It is Israel's story about itself and God. Israel defines itself as a people who refuses to let go of God. They tell us that they will fight with God to demand that Yahweh bless them. They are a people who are willing to be changed, as signified by the name change, and even damaged in that exchange, because they know that attaining that blessing is worth the sacrifice. They are not a people of passive faith.

For today's Christian readers who claim to be heirs of that faith, this story offers a vivid biblical model of prayer. It suggests that God is not looking for wimpy followers. Yahweh rewards those who fight for the heavenly blessing. Although at the outset of the story, Yahweh is unrecognizable, it is in wrestling with God that Jacob's heirs encounter God's face. The story ends with the sun shining and the reader limping away with a blessing.

Many commentators have tried desperately to make Jacob out to be the loser here, since he limps away, having suffered the dirty trick of the hip being pulled out from its socket by his opponent. They wanted to make Jacob the loser because they have identified the "man" as God, as Jacob names the place of the struggle "Peniel", or "face of God", claiming "I have seen God face to face, yet I have survived."

However, only Jacob names the man as God. Why should we trust Jacob to decide for us who his opponent was? Jacob is a consummate liar as has been seen again and again. Since the man announces that Jacob has won all his matches, is undefeated against all opponents, it makes us very suspicious about calling this match a divine-human encounter. Jacob's real antagonist may have well been himself. Who else would crow that he has never lost a bout; who else would shout that

he has seen God face to face (an event only afforded to Moses in the later traditions of Israel) and yet has survived the confrontation?

As Jacob continued on his way, he sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau. His message was a humble greeting and announcement of his coming and hope that Esau would be friendly toward him. The messengers returned telling Jacob Esau was on his way with an army of 400 men. Jacob was terrified, so he divided his household. If Esau were to attack one group, the other would be safe. So Jacob prayed. During the night he got up and took his two wives and crossed the Jabbok River sending his possessions to the other side.

Jacob, who claimed he had seen God's face while wrestling with God, finally does see God face to face, but not until he recognizes God in the face of his doltish brother Esau, whom he expects will kill him in retaliation for all he has stolen from him. But instead, Esau welcomes him with a massive hug and slobbery kiss. Rather than encountering God at Jabbok, to his incredulous surprise, Jacob saw God in the last place he expected to find God, namely the gracious acceptance of Esau.

Jacob is affirmed in his own righteous victories by himself, his real opponent at Jabbok, though he tries to turn the man into God. Only when he sees Esau does he see God, and it will not be because of a great struggle against God, but rather an amazing reception of unexpected grace and love on the part of old Esau.

And so it may often be with us. Do we not often find God in very unexpected places, mirrored in very unexpected people? Perhaps once we open ourselves to such wild possibilities, we may in fact encounter the living God, rather than a god made somehow in our own image.

The character of Jacob and the character of God are both remarkably displayed. God does not punish Jacob's conflictive character, but challenges it and reshapes it so that Jacob is able to live into his promised destiny as Israel, which means "one who strives with God and humans". Jacob's story is a much-needed reminder that in the life of faith, there is no one model to which we must conform and submit. God entertains all kinds of characters and personalities, even those who appear to be unconventional or irreverent by our standards.

Finally, the story also challenges any attempt to domesticate God and make the deity fit into some easy mold; whether that is "the wrathful God", or the "God who meets my needs". Jacob came away from the encounter with unbounded blessings, but he also walked away limping - a man permanently marked. It attests to the complex reality of a God who is intimately engaged with humans, who seeks them out, and blesses them, even if it reminds us that this God is wily, unpredictable, and even dangerous - a God who does not want us to ever let go.

There is a Swahili warrior song on adversity: *Life has meaning only in the struggle. Triumph or defeat is in the hands of God.* So let us celebrate the struggle.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE PENTECOST 17, SEPTEMBER 24,2023

Gathered together today we bring our prayers of praise and thanksgiving as well as our prayers and laments for our world, God's Creation, and all those in need.

God of all Creation, we give thanks for the recent rainfall and the cooler weather in our corner of the world which is a welcome, small reprieve from the parched weeks and warmer temperatures of this summer. We pray that the cooler weather will help those still involved in forest fire suppression to complete their work in ending the fires that have been so prevalent this summer. We pray that the rains will also begin to refill streams, rivers and lakes to provide a better habitat for fish, and wildlife who rely on these waters. For those involved in harvesting the land and vines may there be sufficient good weather to successfully bring in the crops, to give food for livestock and humans alike.

Holy One, we long to be faithful stewards of your love – to know, love, and to serve you and each other with humility, wisdom and love. But God, at times our world is full of despair that we can't hold ourselves up and we lose sight of your handiwork in our daily lives. We need you, God, to hold us up – to calm our hurting souls as we face the realities of a hurting world around us.

O God, we ask that you fill us with your peace as we remember our neighbours. Although their names are unknown to us, we know you are holding them for us. We pray for all the people and communities across Canada who have been impacted by fires or flooding this year. As the days grow shorter there is an urgency to begin the long and difficult work of rebuilding homes and communities before the ground freezes. We ask that you would provide the materials in the supply chains, the trades people, road engineers, and other workers and services to rebuild the infrastructure in these communities where the need for rebuilding houses and businesses is great.

O God, we lift up the names of your beloveds in Morocco and Libya and Hong Kong where the death toll is growing and the people continue to suffer the damages of the earthquake and floods, including homelessness, massive destruction of buildings and roads, and loss of family members and friends. We have no words at times to express how we feel about such devastation, and so we ask that you may hold the lives of those left behind in your unshakeable arms.

O God, we pray for Israel as mass protests continue as the court considers its own overhaul and as oppression and violence in the occupied territories continues. We call out the evils of war with the Russian aggression upon Ukraine. May peacebuilding efforts replace the focus of making and supplying more deadly weapons. We pray that a peace can be brokered.

O God, we pray for the millions of refugees and migrants, many of whom are women, children and the elderly, around the world, looking for homes and safety, a place to dream and live in peace, free from wars, conflicts and violence. Protect and support all the homeless in our own communities and around the world. Help them find refuge and keep them safe.

O God, we pray for your children in Australia as they face predicted severe bushfires. We pray that you may walk with them as they navigate what will likely be a terrible season of fires ahead. We ask for your support for the three countries and six organizations dedicated to public safety who are meeting. Over 200 individuals are coming together with one goal: to deliver effective wildfire management and emergency response support.

O God, we pray for our local firefighters throughout BC who have been working so hard during this very long fire season, some sacrificing their lives as they protect their communities. With sadness we remember the four fire fighters who lost their lives in a vehicle collision this week. And we pray also for the family and friends of the RCMP officer shot in the line of duty, whose years of service to his community is remembered.

O God, with heavy hearts, we recall countries and ideologies throughout history, including countries where Christians have harmed and killed those who were different, including the abuse, neglect and genocide incurred by our Indigenous siblings and residential schools as we learned this week of another 158 new unmarked graves of missing children uncovered. We pray also that the upcoming referendum in October in Australia would pass, to bring changes to their constitution to entrench the Indigenous voice in matters related to the Indigenous peoples of that region of the world.

Lord Jesus, you took children in your arms and blessed them. We pray for the children, parents, caregivers and staff affected by the daycare e- coli crisis and outbreak in Calgary. Hold these little ones in your love, guide those providing care, and restore these children to health. Give medical staff, government officials and day care providers wisdom as they try to determine the cause and be implored to implement the changes that must be made to keep children safe. Bring peace to anxious hearts and show us how we might be able to provide support, especially to parents.

This week we remember Living Faith Lutheran in Sechelt and Rev. Richard Hergesheimer and Lord of Life Mission in Sandspit - Rev. Jim Whaley as well our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza. We pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, our pastors, deacons and lay leaders. We lift up our own congregation that you guide our visions and help us to discern the future you are preparing for us.

O God, we pray for all who suffer from physical, emotional, and mental illness, including those living with the effects of substance abuse. Bring them the support they need to enable healing and hope to be experienced. Support all who are awaiting or undergoing surgery, therapies and treatments. We give thanks for the healing that has occurred in a member of our congregation.

O God, we long to do our best. Sometimes our laments are greater than our thanksgiving and praise for your constant presence in all circumstances. Forgive us when we lose our equilibrium and become overwhelmed with the many things in our world that are broken and unjust. Comfort us. Be a blanket for our souls and draw us closer to you. Hold us in your care when we cannot hold ourselves. May we know, love, and serve you and each other in humility even when we realize that our own strength and resources are not enough to do all that we would like to do. Remind us daily to turn to you for all we need to be equipped to be your hands and feet in the world you love so much. In the meantime, may we hold onto your promises, and our hope in a world where wholeness and wellbeing are enjoyed by all. In your Son's precious name, we pray.

Amen.

God in Community, make us all united in one Body, your living church, as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Our Father ...