

Wrestling with God

Psalm 17:1-7, 15 *If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me....*

Genesis 32:22-33:4 *Then the man said, "You shall no longer be
called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God
and with humans, and have prevailed."*

The last time we saw Jacob, he was sent by his overbearing mother and compliant father to find a wife among his relatives back in Haran. At that time, he was a rather pitiful figure, the victim of his own character flaws and a pretty dysfunctional family situation. Now Jacob has worked fourteen years for Laban, his uncle, in order to gain Rachel as his wife. As he returns home, he has two wives, Rachel and her sister Leah, and a large entourage of family, servants, and flocks. He's done pretty well for himself.

Jacob gets word that his twin brother Esau is on his way to meet him. Remember that Esau got the worst of Jacob's trickery. Jacob and their mother Rebekah manipulated Esau so that he lost the blessing due the firstborn son. When Jacob left home, Esau was angry enough to kill him. We can only assume that Esau's anger has been simmering all these years. Now it appears that Esau is on his way with four hundred men to even the score.

Jacob is overcome with fear. He makes plans to protect himself against brother's wrath. He prepares mountains of gifts to buy off Esau's revenge. He arranges his people and animals into groups so that maybe some can escape when Esau attacks. And finally Jacob turns to God, praying something like this: God, you promised to take care of me. You remember that, don't you? Well, now would be a really good time to make good on that promise! Jacob is still the manipulator, concerned with saving his own neck.

Jacob's journey toward the dreaded meeting with Esau is interrupted by a strange nighttime encounter of another kind. Jacob has sent all the people and animals across the Jabbok River, a tributary of the Jordan. He is alone in the darkness when an unidentified man, or being, comes at him out of nowhere. The two wrestle all night long.

Jacob is holding his own when the stranger resorts to a dirty trick to get an advantage. He touches Jacob's hip joint, dislocating it. Here is the first hint that this is no ordinary human, but some other kind of being--demon or angel or river spirit. The text does never tell us outright. Only tantalizing hints.

Finally, the "man" pleads with Jacob to let him go for day is about to break. Here is another hint of the extra-ordinary nature of this being, an ancient belief that certain spirits had to retreat during the day or lose their powers. Jacob refuses to let him go until he gets a blessing. It was also believed that one could wrest a blessing, that is, divine power and energy, from a supernatural being.

The "man" asks Jacob's name. A name was believed to contain a person's identity and character, a person's spirit. Jacob discloses his name. The "man" says that from now on he will no longer be Jacob—trickster and cheat—but Israel, one who strives with God and human beings and prevails. Now the story raises the possibility that this "man" is in reality God, or at least a being who acts on God's behalf. This blessing, this name change, is an echo of the original blessing and covenant given to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

Jacob wants to know his adversary's name, but is refused. The true identity and power of this being is not for Jacob to know. Here is another hint that this is an encounter with God. The Name of God could be possessed or even pronounced by the faithful Jew, it was considered so sacred, so transcendent and powerful. No human can own or control God or God's name.

The story ends with Jacob limping off to join his family as the sun comes up. It is a strangely profound and moving scene that could inspire an artist. Jacob, who was frozen in fear of his brother, still trying to find a way out of it, was confronted by God, or at least God's emissary in the form of this strange being. He fights for his life and comes out of it with a new name, a deeper and wider purpose for his life, and the energy or vitality of God's blessing. But he also comes away wounded, marked outwardly and perhaps inwardly as well.

We get the feeling that this encounter has prepared Jacob for the impending meeting with Esau. He is not the same. He is stronger for having wrestled alone with God and received a truer and deeper purpose to his life. Yet he is wounded. The self-centeredness of his past has received a permanent and yet strangely empowering injury. He goes on to meet Esau with a different "name," a different spirit. He seems ready to accept whatever happens but with a new spiritual awareness. Perhaps Jacob has gained the kind of humility that liberates us from self-centeredness and makes us aware of our relatedness to the larger and wider realities of life, including the persons with whom we have "issues." We are prepared to move through conflict, tension and potential violence to the greater reality of God's purposes for our lives, toward reconciliation and peace. Having wrestled with God in our own spirits, we are ready to be open to whatever the future may bring.

As I have thought about this strange story over the years, it always and even more so today speaks to me of those experiences in our

lives that change us at a deep level. I see this nighttime encounter of Jacob as reflecting the kinds of experiences we have when we wrestle with ourselves, our own lives, and with God. We come out of it changed, with a wider and deeper understanding, but also wounded. Like Jacob, we have a tendency to either run from ourselves or continue to live at the mercy of all our undealt-with stuff. We often live in fear of other people, the world, or life itself because we are afraid of ourselves, of the things we have not faced or don't want to face. Our self-destructive behavior. Our hostilities toward others that are rooted in our own insecurities. Old patterns of self-protection and competitiveness that keep us from finding and affirming our God-created bond with others. Or our chronic feelings of self-disdain, which are really only another form of self-centeredness, of taking ourselves too seriously. Whatever it is that has kept us from living fully and freely, with compassion and love continues to dog us until something happens that is like Jacob's wrestling match, when we finally face what it is we need to face.

This story is so mysterious, leaving so much to our spiritual imaginations, that we shouldn't try to say it means one thing or another. Its power lies in its raising important and fruitful wonderings. Could it be that God is precisely in those struggles we have with ourselves or others, the very things we don't want to face? And as we deal with difficult experiences or dimensions of our lives and spirits, could it be that God is in the process as the power of new life, the power and presence that will make something new out of it, out of us? We work with our spiritual lives as a disciplined inward journey so that we can become aware of and sensitive to those experiences or parts of our lives which are so difficult, so that we can perceive God's presence in them, what God is trying to teach us or bring to us. When we become aware of these things in ourselves, lift them up to examination under God's grace, then we find ways to no longer run from, avoid, or despise those dimensions of ourselves. We find ways of allowing God to transform them in some way in compassion, forgiveness, and love. This is also why it is important that we have someone or a mission group to share these wrestlings with. Like Jacob, no one else can face these things for us, but we don't have to wrestle with it all alone. We can do so in a community of love and support.

When we face something difficult, something in our own lives or in our relationships, it can change us. If we recognize that God is in the process, then we discover a deeper spirituality, perhaps a new insight into what it really means to live by faith, to live in relationship to God. But it will leave us with a limp, a woundedness that brings us greater openness toward others because we have found a more profound humility as well as love. This part of the story leaves me with the

question: Are we not meant to wrestle with God so that our full humanity, in all its strength and weakness, is brought forth, is discovered and lived?

Jacob now is ready to face Esau and whatever may happen. He lines up his family for the approach, with Rachel and her children in the back, still a protective strategy on his part. The difference is, though, that Jacob himself goes out in front. Maybe he is still scared to death, but he goes with a newfound spiritual courage. He approaches Esau with bows of humility. But something entirely unexpected happens. Esau runs toward him and the two brothers after all these years and all the alienation embrace and kiss with love and joy.

Something has happened to Esau, too. We don't know what it is, but he is no longer angry and avenging. His love for his brother, the basic bond between them, has triumphed over everything else. This scene reminds us of another, the parable Jesus told of the prodigal son's return. There the father, who had been so ill-treated by his son's self-centeredness, rushes out to meet him upon his return. He, like Esau, is not interested in apologies or confessions. He is only happy that his son has safely returned. We come to the conclusion of this story with the sense that God has been working in the depths not only in Jacob's life but in Esau's as well. The story never says this explicitly. Yet there is an underlying message that in all our struggles, alienations and broken relationships, in all the wrestling that we do with ourselves, others, and life itself, God, the creator and sustainer and redeemer of life, is always at work in the depths to bring about new life. God is always working to restore the wholeness and harmony of our bondedness with one another that is there because God is the God of us all. And it is by our willingness to struggle mightily with God and ourselves, as did Jacob, that we participate in what God is doing for us and for the world. We can have a new name, like Jacob's, for we have struggled with God and human beings, and prevailed. Though we come out of it limping.