

meeting of these two brothers. What is most important is the present and future. Someone has said that forgiveness is letting go of our hopes for a better past! As Jacob and Esau meet, life is again whole, fresh, new. They have ended their suffering.

The spiritual life is not for the fainthearted! We wrestle with ourselves, with God, with our relationships with other people and life around us. Sometimes it happens when some experience attacks us, like the river demon that night. Sometimes the wrestling is very long and hard, and asks of us not only strength but great patience. We get wounded and come out limping, not as proud or arrogant or sure of ourselves as before. And yet we also begin to know the blessing of having held our own, so to speak, with life, with God. It is the inner strength and peace that comes from facing reality even at its most painful and challenging. This wondrous story does not provide us with answers or 10 simple steps to spiritual living. It simply gives us a picture, a story that can encourage us to face the “demons” that attack us from without or within. The story affirms that somehow God is in the experience, and we come out with a blessing, also with a limp, but with hearts more open.

August 3, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Struggling with God**

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

*...when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*

Genesis 32:22-31; 33:1-4

*“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*

Jacob’s life is catching up with him. He is alienated from his twin brother, having tricked Esau out of the rights due the first born son (Gen. 25). He took advantage of their father Isaac’s blindness to steal the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau (Gen. 27). He fell in love with Rachel, his cousin, and manipulated his uncle Laban, making off with Laban’s best livestock, as well as both of his daughters, Rachel and Leah. Just prior to our reading for today, Jacob made an uneasy truce with Laban, who had pursued him in a vengeful mood. The two part company as mistrusting enemies.

Jacob has fled Laban to return home, but there he must face his brother. He sends his servants ahead to promise Esau gifts and curry his favor. The servants bring back word that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob, along with four hundred men. Jacob is in fear and panic. What will he do now? How can he get out of this one? I think that Jacob is different from us only by degree. He is thinking and plotting his way through life, figuring out this angle and that, trying to control things so that they go his way. When he messes up, rather than face what he has done, he just sharpens his skill for devising and self-protection. Or he just runs from one messed up situation to the next, not dealing with the real problems. Jacob possesses God’s blessing and promise, even though he got it by devious methods. God has accepted Jacob and will be with him. But right now, Jacob’s life is pretty much a mess of his own making.

Jacob hatches yet another plan. He will divide his livestock into groups, sending one after another in front of him. His servants will offer each herd or flock as a gift to Esau. Jacob hopes to wear down Esau’s anger with his generosity. Jacob and his family will bring up the rear. If all else fails, maybe he can turn tail and run!

Jacob arrives at the ford of the Jabbok River. Night is falling. Jacob sends his family, livestock and servants across the ford. He is left by himself on the other side when a mysterious man attacks him. This figure is never clearly identified, yet has the aura of a non-human being. There were ancient beliefs that demons and spirits inhabited certain places. Maybe this is a river demon.

The fight is intense, lasting all night. Jacob refuses to let go or be defeated, but it seems he cannot win. Finally, the “man” touches Jacob’s hip, dislocating it. Still Jacob holds on. The faint light of dawn arrives and the “man” pleads with Jacob to let

him go. Now it is clear that this is no human being. It must flee before daylight, like the vampire legends.

Jacob refuses. "I will let you go only if you bless me." It was believed that a blessing could be gained from such supernatural beings, whether they were good or evil. The being asks Jacob his name. "No longer will your name be Jacob (which means in Hebrew "supplanter" or cheat). You will be called Israel, one who has striven with God and with human beings and prevailed." Jacob then asks his name, which he refuses to give. It is not clear now that this "man" is only a river demon. There seems to be something of the divine here. Usually it is God who gives names, claiming the person and calling forth by the name the essence or spirit or purpose of the person. If not God, it is someone naming as a way of expressing the person's relationship with God or role in God's purposes. The "man" refuses to give Jacob his name. This preserves and hides the identity of this being that has wrestled with Jacob. To have someone's name, especially a divine being, is not only to know the identity but to claim its power. The name of God is unpronounceable, must be always protected from possession or any misuse, even speaking.

With that, the mysterious being vanishes. Jacob gives the place a name—Peniel, meaning "the face of God." Jacob has experienced this attack, this traumatic event as somehow a face-to-face encounter with God. The story ends with what I find to be one of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip." Light at last dawning upon Jacob, who has survived the long, exhausting struggle. In it all he has touched God, experienced God's strength and care. Yet he walks away wounded.

The Jacob who arrives at the banks of the Jabbok is very different from the Jacob who limps past Peniel in the early light of morning, catching up with his family and heading toward the inevitable encounter with his estranged brother. I don't think this story is to be picked apart and analyzed in every aspect. More than other stories and passages of scripture, this story is like the flower which, if we take its petals off one by one, loses its beauty, its life, its benefit for us. Neither are we to assume that there is one particular truth or meaning in it. We are left to wonder, to see what places in our own lives are touched by it. The story leads us toward spiritual reflection on our lives and our life as a human family.

One of the foremost reflections for me out of this strange and wonderful story is this: When we encounter or seek to encounter God's reality in our lives, it is like Jacob's experience that night. It means wrestling, struggling, striving. It means dealing with our own life without the dependencies we have on people and possessions. Jacob's family and flocks had gone on ahead; he was left alone. This story provides an image, a picture of what it means to live in relation to the reality of God and of our own lives. Finding and living out of our relationship with God brings us both a blessing and a limp! We are both humbled and elevated, or both at once. We become true human beings the way God made us to be and live.

I have said often that the spiritual life is not easy. You know that. To take our lives seriously, seeking what it means to be in relation to God and to others and to the world as creation—this is not easy. It is demanding and asks something of us. It asks us to face the realities of our lives, to see deeper meanings, to come to fuller understandings. We can no longer run from or avoid those things in us that are causing others and ourselves pain and unhappiness. We can no longer keep up the pretenses and appearances and justifications. We stop, quiet ourselves, begin to look into what is going on inside us, what is controlling the ways we relate to ourselves and others. Sometimes it is like that all-night wrestling match.

The inward journey is what we call it. It is the path of learning how to face the reality of our lives in and out of our relationship with God. It is the work of looking more deeply into ourselves and growing in self-understanding. It is the decision to live consciously, in awareness, no longer asleep, no longer letting our living be controlled by things in us we are afraid to look at, understand, or let go of. Sometimes this happens when we are forced to it, when some painful experience forces us to stop, look, and listen—stop running around on the surface of life, look deeply into what is happening and ourselves, listen inwardly for what we are being taught. But the deeper spiritual journey is not just the result of or response to a traumatic event. It can be the path of our life, the path we choose when we work with spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, study, reflection, self-examination—the inward journey. Wrestling with God becomes our way of life, not because it is easy or painless, but because it leads us to a deeper and fuller life, the life of being fully aware and awake as God's children.

Whatever happened to Jacob there on the banks of the Jabbok River, it had the effect of preparing him to meet his brother. He assumed that his brother was coming to exact revenge, to vent his anger and hurt which had fermented all those years. Yet he went ahead anyway. More than that, Jacob now goes in front of his family and servants and livestock. He goes forth toward Esau not only limping but also bowing. He is bowing to the brother he loves, the brother he has wronged, the brother who has every right to be angry and to express his anger. Jacob, now Israel, goes forward wounded and whole, limping and inwardly peaceful and strong. He is ready for whatever comes.

Here comes Esau, not at the head of an army of his men to wipe out Jacob and his clan. He rushes to meet his brother, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. Something has also happened in Esau's life. There has been a letting go, an opening up that makes him eager to embrace his brother regardless of the past. What we have is a deeply moving picture of forgiveness, of letting go. What is forgiveness but letting go of the past and its hold on us? It is letting go of the hurt we have experienced, the harm we have caused, in order that there be healing. Forgiveness is for the sake of ending suffering—our own, others', and the world's. There are no words of forgiveness even spoken. It is something that happens in the