

August 3, 2014 / 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 with vengeance in mind.

Jacob is returning home after a long absence. Anticipating his brother’s anger, 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 a panic. How can he get out of this one? Jacob possesses God’s blessing and promise, but his life is now a mess of his own making, and it is all coming to a head. 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, to appease his anger. Jacob and his family will bring up the rear. If all else fails, he can turn tail and run!

Night is falling as Jacob arrives at the ford of the Jabbok River. He sends his family, livestock, and servants across the stream. He is alone when a mysterious man attacks him. This figure is never clearly identified, yet seems to be non-human. 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. Finally, the “man” touches Jacob’s hip, dislocating it. Still Jacob holds on. The faint first light of dawn appears, and the “man” pleads with Jacob to let him go. Now it is clear that this is no human being. It draws its strength from the night, losing it at sunrise. Jacob refuses. “I will let you go

only if you bless me.” It was believed that a blessing could be gained from supernatural beings, whether they were good or evil. One could receive some of the being's power. The demon asks Jacob his name, and says: “No longer will your name be Jacob (in Hebrew “supplanter” or trickster). You will be called Israel, one who has struggled with God and with human beings and prevailed.” Jacob then asks his name, which he refuses to give. There seems to be more here than a river demon, something...of the divine. Usually it is God who gives names, claiming the person, calling forth by naming the essence or spirit or purpose of the person. If not God, this is someone perhaps acting on God's behalf, a messenger, an “angel”. Or, possibly even a river demon serves God's purposes. That the “man” refuses to give Jacob his name preserves and hides the identity of this being. To have the name of a divine being is to claim its power. The true name of God is unpronounceable, protecting God's utter mystery, beyond human control or use.

Jacob names place Peniel, meaning “the face of God.” Whoever or whatever attacked him, Jacob has experienced and understood this event as a face-to-face encounter with God. The story ends with one of the most elegant and beautiful sentences in the Bible: “The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel (a variant of Peniel), limping because of his hip.” Light at last dawns upon Jacob, who has survived the long, exhausting struggle. He has gained a new name, a new relationship with God, and with himself. He comes out of it changed, even wounded. The Jacob who arrived at the bank of the river that night was very different from the Jacob who now limps along in the early light of morning, catching up with his family and heading toward the inevitable encounter with his estranged brother.

This story stands out as one of the most wonder-filled stories in our scriptures. Its meaning is dynamic, and evokes rich reflection on our lives, our experiences, and what it means to live life as a spiritual journey.

The story stresses that Jacob was alone when he was attacked. It is more than just being physically by himself. He is alone with his own life, with the things he has experienced, the things he must face, who he is as a person. When we are alone in this way—which essentially we are—there are no more distractions, no more ways of avoiding our own lives and how we live them. We see that we cannot blame others or live vicariously through them. We are alone with ourselves... and our relationship with God.

An authentic spiritual life teaches us to be alone in this way. We call it solitude. We no longer look to someone else to give us answers or take care of us in some way. We learn to

acknowledge, accept, and embrace the reality of our own lives, including those parts that cause us pain or discomfort. We learn to be with ourselves, and to wrestle, like Jacob, with our demons—our guilt, anger, fear, or sense of inadequacy, or some other aspect of our inward or outward life. For me, this story is so compelling because it tells us that God is in these struggles, in this process of coming to our true, authentic self. This story provides a powerful image or picture of what it means to live in relation to the reality of God and of our own lives. It involves the greatest of blessings—the strength of discovering and embracing of our true, authentic self. It also results in a limp—a real and humble awareness of our limits, our smallness, and the letting go of the grand illusions that were attached to our false or ego-centered self. We are both humbled and elevated. We become true human beings the way God made us to be and live.

The spiritual life is not easy, as you know. 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 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 stop running from or avoiding those things in us that are causing others and ourselves pain and unhappiness. We can let go of the pretenses and appearances and justifications. We learn to stop, quiet ourselves, and look into what is going on inside us, what has been driving us in unproductive, unhealthy, and unhappy ways. An all-night wrestling match is not a bad image for the spiritual life.

This is all part of what we call the inward journey. 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 difficult experiences attack us, force us to stop, look, and listen. It is not always about difficult events in our lives. It becomes the path we choose as we work with spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, study, reflection, self-examination—the inward journey. Wrestling with God becomes our way of life because it leads us to a deeper and fuller life, the life of being more aware and awake as God's children. We experience the sunrise of our true self, which includes walking with a limp, humbler, more open, less full of ourselves, you might say, with more room for God and God's love in us and through us.

We need to know the rest of the story. I read just a few verses beyond our text for today:
Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in

front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (33:1-4)

Whatever happened to Jacob on the bank of the river, it prepared him to meet his brother in a radically different way. He probably still believed that his brother was coming to exact revenge. Yet he went ahead anyway. Notice that Jacob now goes in front of his family and servants and livestock, exposed, open. He is also bowing to the brother he loves, the brother he has wronged, the brother who has every right to retaliate. Jacob, no longer the trickster, is now Israel, who struggled with God, going forward wounded yet whole, limping yet peaceful and strong. He is ready for whatever comes.

Here comes Esau, rushing to meet his brother, throwing his arms around him, and kissing 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 renewed life, of forgiveness, of letting go. As Jacob and Esau meet, life is again whole, fresh, new. They have ended their suffering.

Living an intentional spiritual life, we wrestle with ourselves, with God, with our relationships with other people and life around us. Sometimes it happens when some difficult 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 for the long haul. 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. We draw from our experiences the strength and peace that comes from facing reality even at its most painful and challenging. This wondrous story does not give us easy answers or a nice system for spiritual living. This powerful, vivid story affirms that God is in the hard times as well as the pleasant and lovely times, that, as our psalm said last week, God is present everywhere we are, even in "Sheol", the places of death. When we live this way, we come out with a blessing, also with a limp, but with hearts more open.