The Divine Wrestling Match

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Genesis 32:22-31

*Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

Genesis 32:24

The story of Jacob – not just this pivotal, transformational moment that forms the lectionary reading for the day – his whole life, as revealed in Genesis, is one of the most compelling, human dramas in all of the Bible. I had to share my enthusiasm for it with you. I was sorely tempted to preach on the gospel selection, the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, also one of my favorites. Jacob won out.

The story of Jacob fascinates me on a number of levels. On one level, I really relate to the family dynamics. Jacob, you may recall was one of the twins born to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau, the other twin, emerged from Rebekah’s womb first. So even though it was only a matter of minutes, Esau was the first born, with all the privileges attached thereto. He got the lion’s share of physical size and quickly became his father’s favorite. More about that later. His stature soon led him to more physical activities. He was the hunter, the protector. He probably lettered in football, basketball and baseball and got scholarships to play for all the major powerhouses in college athletics.

Jacob, on the other hand, was the runt of the litter. Rebekah soon embraced him as her favorite. Slight of build, he learned cooking, buried his head in the books, and was the sensitive one. He probably graduated as valedictorian and went to an Ivy League school, where he graduated summa cum laude. Unable to physically excel, he got by on his smarts. His name even can be translated as *cunning* *or trickster*. He was a survivor. Esau and Jacob, twins from the same parents, totally different. Have you known siblings like that?

Two stories help us understand the family dynamics. Esau, you remember, was the hunter. After a long day out in the wilds, foraging for food for the table, he returns home famished. Meanwhile, Jacob, the culinary genius, has concocted his *piece de resistance*, beef stew and rice. From afar off, Esau can smell that familiar and alluring aroma. He can hardly contain himself and demands a portion. *Not so fast*, Jacob the wheeler dealer replies. *I’ll give you some, but only if you give me something in return.* To make a long story short, Jacob manipulates Esau out of his birthright in exchange for a portion of the stew. So instead of Esau, Jacob becomes the privileged first son. For a bowl of stew?

The other story that tells you much about the character of Jacob happens between Jacob and his father Isaac. As the story unwinds, Isaac has suffered the ravages of age and is now sightless. Again, to make a long story short, Jacob goes to Isaac, coached by the equally deceptive Rebekah, pretends to be Esau, and manipulates the blessing that should go to the firstborn older twin, an act that Isaac, once he pronounces the blessing, cannot take it back, even after he realizes he had been conned. Esau finds out what has happened and is red-faced angry. Jacob, knowing what’s good for him, hightails it out of Dodge and to his uncle Laban, wherein more shenanigans take place. In fleeing, he has, in reality, burned his bridges behind him. That, my friends, tells you what kind of man forms the final third of the triumvirate known as the patriarchs, the spiritual fathers of our faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I appreciate that about our Hebrew forebears: they are not afraid to tell you the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help us God, about the giants of faith. They are very human. It gives me encouragement that God can use us, too.

Many years have passed when we pick up the story of the divine wrestling match that is our reading for the day. Jacob has made a life for himself, married Laban’s daughters, Rachel and Leah, and amassed great wealth. Through the fickle finger of fate, or the hand of God – I believe the latter – Jacob is put on a collision course with his older twin. As that plot unfolds, a messenger comes back to Jacob that Esau and four hundred of his men are coming to meet him. That ominous message leaves Jacob shaking in his sandals. The day of reckoning has come. Sending his entourage ahead, he remains behind. His past has finally caught up with him. Night falls, alone with his memories, spiritually naked before his Maker. Let the wrestling match begin.

But now Jacob is equipped to handle it.  He has spent time in prayer, has renewed his confidence in God, has done everything in his power to help his situation (moving his family, and sending along presents to soften his brother) and now he is left alone to hash it out with God.  
And during the course of the wrestling match, Jacob remains strong, (and why wouldn’t he be- he has armed himself with the promises of God). He is, in fact so strong  that the man strikes him on his hip and knocks it out of joint and still Jacob won’t let go. Reminds me of you, Russell.   
 How many of us have been here? When things are dark and the struggle becomes so difficult that we feel like even what little firm ground we did have to stand on gets shaken- when any leverage we had is taken away from us.  
And the man says to Jacob “Let go already- it’s almost morning!” But Jacob grabs on even tighter- grits his teeth and says “No- not until you bless me!”  
 And in that moment, Jacob, at least in my mind, acquires what it takes to be a Patriarch.  Because when everything is on the line for him, and seemingly everything is about to be taken from him, he doesn’t let go. He doesn't let go of his boldness; doesn't let go of God’s promises, not until he gets blessed, in other words, not until he gets whatever it is that God intends for him!  
 Curiously, the man asks him “What is your name?” And Jacob tells him.  But, in responding, Jacob not just saying his name, but stating everything he knows to be true about himself, his identity as a person, his history of duplicity and deceit. Jacob knows full well who and what he is and where he has come from. Stating his name is an act of confession. And he is at once free to take on everything God has destined for him to become.  
 And as an acknowledgment of the new identity to come, God baptizes him with a new name. *From now on your name is no longer Jacob- but Israel.* No longer the trickster, the master manipulator, the con artist *par excellence*. You are Israel, *The one who struggles with God*.

Can you imagine doing that in your own life? If you were unable to identify yourself or talk about yourself in a way that was anything other than God-like?

I can painfully relate to Jacob. I have wrestled with my past, just as he did. There are so many things I have done, words I have spoken, things I should have done that I didn’t. My past appears to me at night, and I wrestle with it, wishing I had acted differently, said or left unsaid, harsh words and deeds.  
 So many times we hang on to the names and perceptions of who we are that are either given to us by our parents, or our peers, or even our actions- we get so caught up in our identity; in what we call ourselves, or the bad ways we act or think, or the things we have done, that we miss the fact that God has already given us a new identity- a new name, not through a wrestling match like Jacob, but through the cross of Jesus Christ.  Through Christ, we leave our “Jacob” identity behind and have been given a new identity in Christ.   
 So I call myself 'Wally,' and all the things it means to be Wally, to be identified as Wally, but through Christ I am named, *Holy*.  I call myself Wally, and all that means to be Wally, all that Wally is or has done or thinks or feels, but through Christ I am *named, Righteous.*  I call myself Wally, but through Christ I am *Faithful.* Not through some new virtue, some amazing new power, but because of what has been done for me in Jesus.   
 And I’m not saying that accepting these names or growing into those identities is easy- that’s the wrestling part- the struggle, and most likely by the time I am done, I will end up with a limp.

But let us learn from Jacob- keep at it through the night. You know what God has promised, and if you don’t, come and talk to me about it.  You know what God has told you is true- that God has plans for you to give you a hope and a future, to prosper you and not harm you- boldly claim the promise that God will always be with you, confidently proclaim that God will always forgive you, will always love you, no matter what. Believe those promises Believe God, and don’t let go, "not until you bless me…" And God will.