

Sermon for August 2, 2020
 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
 Sermon Text: Genesis 32: 22-31 and Matthew 14: 13-21
 Sermon Title: *Wrestling*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: O God of nighttime visits and daylight assurance, we come to this time of worship to wrestle with who we are, and who you call us to be. Search our hearts and know us thoroughly. We long to meet you face to face, even if the encounter leaves us forever changed. With open ears and ready hearts, touch us with your words and transform us with your presence. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, write God's word indelibly upon our hearts as we seek to understand that we are a covenant people and to become more faithful disciples. Amen.

The poet W.H. Auden once wrote about the *wild prayer of longing* that rises out of the average human household. *O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth of waterclocks and hedges. Become our Uncle. Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his home-work, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.*

We might choose our words more carefully, but we've probably all longed for the same thing: protection, prosperity, and a God who acts more like a genie that we can put back in a bottle than one that frightens us out of our wits. We don't want to be like Elijah, trembling under his broom tree, asking God to take his life, or like Paul, flat on his belly on the road to Damascus in total darkness.

How many of us would choose to be jumped by an unknown assailant who frightens us and wounds us? But that is sometimes how the presence and blessing of God comes. As Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest points out, most of God's best work takes place in total chaos with people scared out of their wits. Take Jacob for example.

Here is a man who is both a liar and a thief. And those are his better qualities! Twenty years before we meet Jacob in today's reading, Jacob fled his home because he conspired with his mother to steal his brother Esau's birthright and his blessing. After leaving his family in chaos, he headed into the wilderness north of Beersheba, arriving in Haran where his

uncle Laban lives. There he falls in love with his beautiful cousin Rachel. Laban is no fool and he makes a deal with Jacob that if he works for seven years he can marry Rachel. But uncle Laban proves to be craftier than Jacob. It's a family trait. Laban substitutes Rachel's sister Leah for Jacob's bride, and now Jacob must work another seven years for his beloved. But it is here in a foreign land in exile that Jacob builds his fortune. Then God speaks: *Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred,*" the Lord says to Jacob, *and I will be with you.*"

However, there still remains the problem with Esau. Jacob fears his brother's wrath, and asks God to deliver him. Jacob falls back on God's promises: *I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.* To placate his brother, Jacob sends hundreds of animals ahead of him – great flocks of sheep and goats, camels and donkeys, moving toward Esau hoping to find favor in his sight and forgiveness. That night he moves servants, wives, and children to the other side of the Jabbok river, then returns to the other side of the ford alone. But he's not alone long. Someone is on his back, wrestling him to the ground. Some say it was an angel; Jacob says it was God who attacked him.

There are several interpretations given for Jacob's struggle with God. Some commentators say that this is only an internal struggle between God and Jacob. Others say that it represents the dark night of the soul when Jacob struggles with his sinful past. There are several details, in the story however, that suggest another interpretation.

I think this is God's story rather than Jacob's story. It's about God's character more than it is about Jacob's.

We know that there is a physical struggle with a man until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail, he strikes Jacob on the hip socket and throws the hip out of joint. Jacob is forever changed physically from this encounter. This is more than an interior struggle. What does it say about God? Well, for one thing God takes the physical form of a man and encounters Jacob on his level. God might have zapped Jacob at any time with the heavenly lightning rod, but God doesn't. God actually struggles with Jacob.

But God does retain certain kinds of power. In ancient cultures, a name contained a great deal of power. Jacob gives up his name to God, but God does not give up God's name to Jacob. Instead, God says: *You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel.* And God blesses him. God can bless us, and we can bless another, but it is not something we can do for ourselves. For all Jacob's success and craftiness, he recognizes the need for a blessing that he can finally only receive from God. Jacob limps toward Esau in whom he sees the face of God for a second time in Esau's embrace. Jacob's exile is over. He is home.

So what have we learned about God and about ourselves from Jacob's story? First, it is God's initiative to come to us. In all the struggles of our days, God is with us, challenging us, convicting us, evaluating us, judging us. The Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann says that God often comes to us in our dreams: *In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the feature of others with whom we struggle in the day.* What a resource our dreams are. God gives us a gracious rehearsal for our actual life circumstances.

God is not a genie, in the business of granting wishes. There's nothing wrong with letting God know what we want as long as we don't mistake our list for God's list. God promises to be our God, but with that promise comes the promise that we will be God's people. We will never be in charge of this covenant relationship.

Our most meticulous preparations for our lives do not guarantee the shape of our futures. How many times has our known world collapsed and we are left gasping for breath? However, if we choose to be God's people, we at least can tilt toward the mystery instead of away from it, and give up our illusion of control. When I look back on the narrative of my own life, I can see that God didn't always give me what I wanted, but God always gave me what I needed to live fully and abundantly within the covenant relationship. AMEN.