

Genesis 32: 24-30

Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

²⁶ The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."

Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

²⁷ The man said, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Jacob."

²⁸ The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."

²⁹ Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"

The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.

³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"

³¹⁻³² The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. (This is why Israelites to this day don't eat the hip muscle; because Jacob's hip was thrown out of joint.)

Wrestling With God: The Story of Jacob

In Old Testament times the names that people were given were often a window into a person's personality or reflected key – life changing - events that took place in their lives.

“Abraham” literally means “Father of the multitude” because of God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. “Isaac”, Abraham’s son literally means “laughter”, because it was so amusing to his mother Sarah that she might become pregnant at age 90.

Isaac had twin boys – Jacob and Esau. The name “Jacob” is translated as “heel” as in your foot or “leg-puller”. When the twins were born it was noted that Jacob was born holding onto the heel of his brother Esau – as if he were trying to pull him back inside the birth canal so he could get out first. It was important because in that culture, it was the first born son who succeeded the father and became the head of the family. It irritated Jacob something awful that he came so close to being number one – but was always going to be boy #2.

Jacob turned into a real heel when he tricked his older brother into selling his right to succeed his father. All he needed to do was to get his father’s blessing then he would be the top dog when Dad kicked off.

So Jacob, the heel, and his mother Rebekah (which means “to tie or to bind” and who always liked Jacob best) worked out a plan to trick the old man who was nearly blind. First he snookered Esau. Esau had been out hunting with the boys – came back famished and there was Jacob cooking up a hearty stew -

“Boy that sure smells good”

“Would you like some?”

“You bet”

“Trade me your birthright for a bowl of stew and it’s yours.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, sure, HA HA HA – where’s my spoon?”

Then it was off to poor blind old Isaac. Since Esau (which means “hairy” was a “hairy guy”, Rebekah dressed Jacob up with a goat skin and the trick worked. Isaac gave the family blessing to Jacob – and even though it was obtained under false pretenses – a blessing was a blessing – after you fired the bullet – you couldn’t put it back in the gun – a blessing once uttered - was sacred and it could not be revoked.

Now Jacob may have thought through this slick maneuver he was adding another rung on his ladder to success – but it was the beginning of trouble when his very angry brother appeared. Jacob had to flee in fear of his life, and ran out the door heading north toward safety.

During his flight, he stopped in the wilderness to get some rest. He tried to sleep while using a stone for a pillow. That was a tad uncomfortable and that discomfort led Jacob, a tired, depressed and harassed young man to the kind of awakening he most needed.

Sometimes that happens to us. When we are worn down, desperate for rest, our pillows seem to turn to stone. There can be tossing and turning, a long night of the soul – yet out of that tossing and turning there sometimes come visions – and we emerge on the other side with a better understanding of what we need to do or who we need to be.

Jacob dreamed that “there was a ladder set up on earth and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.”

Until this dream, Jacob had always thought that ladders were a one-way trip to success with people as the rungs that you climbed on. He learned that it is God who lets down a ladder in order for there to be communion between God and other people. The ladder becomes a symbol of the presence of God that is found – not in our climbing to the top – but in the image of God coming down to meet us through the messengers and messages that guide and direct us.

So Jacob took the stone which he had been using for a pillow and turned it on end, making it a pillar – and he changed the name of the place where this all took place to fit the event. He named it “Bethel”.

“Beth” - house

“el” - God House of God.

I like the symbolism of that story for us. We experience God wherever there is a ladder let down for us. For Jacob it was the wilderness and a run for his life. For us experiencing the presence of God may take place on in a house, at church, on a playground, next to a rushing stream. Wherever it is that we find God’s ladder down for us – it is our Bethel – it is where the presence of God is experienced. God is at home within us.

Well, the story was far from over, because after that restless night at Bethel, Jacob continued to flee northward, to his uncle Laban’s home. Now, Laban (which means “white”) was as much of a shyster used car salesman kind of guy as Jacob – except older and with more experience - he was more “whitewash” than “purity white.” He and Jacob were very much related in the sleazy character department.

The regard that these two had for each other is revealed in that nice Mizpah benediction that many people like – without realizing the original meaning behind the saying:

“ May the Lord watch between me and thee, while we are apart, one from another.” Maybe you’ve seen that engraved on two part necklaces with the first line of the saying on half of a heart, while the second line is engraved on the heart’s matching half. And then you put them together and it’s so sweet.

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In reality, this benediction or parting agreement was really a plea to God to stand guard and enforce the provisions of an agreement between two parties who didn't trust each other and it's meaning could be better translated by the words: "May the Lord watch us both while we're apart, because I don't trust you and you better not trust me."

And we soon learn why that was applicable in the case of Jacob and Laban.

Laban had a beautiful daughter named Rachel (which meant "innocent lamb"), and an older, shall we say, less attractive daughter named Leah (weary) – sort of a Marla Hooch (if you remember that character in the movie *A League of Their Own*). Apparently Leah appeared "weary".

Jacob, of course fell in love with the beautiful Rachel and arranged with Laban to work for him for 7 years in order to win the hand of Rachel in marriage.

Seven years go by and a wedding date is set.

Now in that part of the world, both then and in many places now, women routinely covered their face with a veil. They remove it only at home in the presence of their husbands. Even today, brides often wear a veil until they are given away in marriage. The man lifts the veil and has to take the bride – "for better or worse."

Well Jacob's was apparently an evening wedding. When he went into his tent and lifted the veil of his bride – lo and behold – he had been tricked into taking vows of marriage to Leah. And those vows were just as non-revocable as was Isaac's blessing – deceived or not!

Now maybe the moral of that story could be

- 1) don't get married at night
- 2) make sure your bride is wearing a thin veil and/or
- 3) realize that if you spend your life by trying to take advantage of other people, somebody is eventually get the best of you.

Laban, professes innocence, noting that in their culture it is always the oldest daughter that must marry before the younger daughter is made available – but he does offer Jacob the chance to marry Rachel if he will work for another 7 years.

And so after 7 more years it is done – presumably Jacob checks under the veil before making the final commitment.

After 20 years in exile, Jacob decides that it is time to return to his home and the land that is "legally" his. He is prosperous and feeling pretty good, so prosperous that Uncle Laban is getting a little jealous and encourages him to leave – the sooner the better – which Jacob would gladly do except for one thing – he was afraid of what his brother Esau might still do. But he moves forward, gathering up wives and children, animals and belongings and begins the trek back to Canaan.

On his way home, we're told that Jacob spends another restless night, not with a stone pillow – but this time in a wrestling match with what he thought was a messenger from God, - an angel.

Now maybe at first thought wrestling with angels sounds like fun – but this wasn't one of Charlie's Angels – this was one tough man. And he was no Gorgeous George or Hulk Hogan, faking it for the TV audience.

This guy was wrestling to pin Jacob and to change him permanently. Jacob's dislocated hip and permanent limp give evidence as to the intensity of the struggle.

Earlier I read:

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Israel: "He who wrestles with God". This man was no angel – here was Jacob wrestling with God himself. As a result Jacob has a name change and becomes "Israel" ... "You have wrestled with God".

We know that we have plenty of times when we have that same kind wrestling match with that higher power – that inner voice – that presence that confronts us when we're faced with that struggle between what we want to do and be and what God designed us to do and be. Yet it is out of that struggle that comes an opportunity for a better understanding of who we are, and who we are meant to be. Then comes an opportunity for restoration and a homecoming.

The story of Jacob "the heel" who is transformed through a series of life changing events into Israel "the one who struggles with God" is often our story. Those wrestling matches can be a blessing but they can also throw hips out of place.

Just as the cocky walk of Jacob the heel, the conniving trickster, becomes the limp of a contrite and dependent Israel – so too our schemes and plans can be trashed and washed away by the realization that we can not trick or fool our way through life.

The story of the prodigal son that our youth shared this morning is a similar account of how foolishness, arrogance and selfishness are pathways that lead to isolation and loneliness. And it is when we turn around – when we come to our senses – when we wrestle with God and get pinned down by the question:

are you willing to risk giving up a lifestyle that is always looking for ways to get ahead – always looking out for number one and replace it with a life where selflessness and service are your motivations for living?

Well – that's when restoration and purpose is made possible by the power that always wants to us to be the Bethels (the little houses of God) in the world – by the One who welcomes us home – by the one who will never let us go.

Let us pray: Dear God, may our encounters with you bring strength and humility. May we recognize our responsibilities and embrace the challenges that come our way. May we throw out the fear and replace it with trust, leaning on the promises that have been given through our Lord, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.