

Text: Genesis 32: 22-31  
Title: It's Not About You  
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David Bentley Hart writes about being fourteen and hearing a sermon about hell. The preacher told a parable credited to a fourth century church father that sent young David running in the other direction with questions and perplexing moral and logical dilemmas. He wasn't filled with terror or positioned for piety but he was left wrestling with incongruity and inconsistency and in his words:

*I may, in retrospect, have been at that period very near to concluding that Christianity was too morally confused and distasteful a religion to be accorded any real credence. It was perhaps solely out of loyalty to my father's very deep faith that I did not abandon the whole enterprise some time in my late teens.*

David Bentley Hart went on to a distinguished career as a theologian and biblical translator. But, his experience and that last line pulled me up short. I could have written the same thing.

For as long as I can remember faith has been a struggle. I'm plagued with seeing things slant and always being uneasy or unsettled. I've lived every one of my 60 years in the bosom of the church, I've opened heart, soul, and mind to God in Christ, and yet I can't seem to shut off the questions or stop seeing the shadows. I'm still stuck with struggle, perplexed and barely hanging on, and sometimes the deep faith of my father and my friends has been the only thing that kept me from abandoning the whole enterprise....

So, this morning's text has been a life line for me. It gave me a mirror or a metaphor for my experience with God. Jacob is my patron saint. And therefore, this story feels like familiar territory.

Jacob is alone; all his scheming and deceiving has run its course.

He has done his best to grease the skids by sending ahead his wives, kids and waves of presents, but now he's alone. There is no room for bargaining or back-peddling. There is nowhere to run and no place to hide. In the light of morning he will face his history, but in the dark of night he faces *ish*.

*Ish* is Hebrew for "man." In the middle of the night he wrestles with *ish*. The text is opaque and mysterious. Somehow *ish* is his brother, or his self, or an angel, or God. Because, surely on the way to meet his brother he must deal with his God.

They fight until dawn. Jacob – the quiet, smoothed skinned one, who stayed in the tent and learned from his mother – struggles mightily through the night.

Bone against bone,  
flesh against flesh,  
intertwined, intimate,  
sweaty, sinewy,

digging, dogging,  
gouging, gasping....

They wrestle until Jacob's hip is wrenched from its socket.

But! But, Jacob hangs on for all he's worth and at the first faint hints of dawn he demands a blessing and God gives him a name. Then, he demands a name and God gives him a blessing. Jacob becomes Israel. His identity is formed by what Walter Brueggemann calls an "assault from God." And, he walks away with a limp as a reminder.

Now. When I can't seem to know God as my friend, I've known God has my wrestling partner – which has its own intimacy and sense of identity. And while I walk with it a limp, it's what one preacher calls, "the hermeneutic of the hip." It's a way of reading scripture and being in relationship with God.

Phyllis Tribble writes about it this way:

*Jacob's defiant words to the stranger I take as a challenge to the Bible itself: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." I will not let go of the book unless it blesses me. I will struggle with it. I will not turn it over to my enemies that it curse me. Neither will I turn it over to friends who wish to curse it. No, over against the cursing from either Bible-thumpers or Bible-bashers, I shall hold fast for blessing. But I am under no illusion that blessing, if it comes, will be on my terms – that I will not be changed in the process.*

And, dear friends, that way of reading scripture, a propensity to struggle, and seeing things slant has lent itself to (what this morning marks) 18 years as a preacher. I'm profoundly grateful for a congregation that welcomes or tolerates my wrestling.

That might seem like enough for a sermon in a parking lot, but I kept stumbling over my own self-absorption this week. I kept thinking, "It's not about you." This text is far more than a mirror or metaphor for a particular brand of spirituality....

What if we come at it this way?

Jacob was a scoundrel.

He screwed his brother out of both blessing and birthright.

He schemed with his mother and lied to his father.

He struggled with and fled from his father-in-law.

He got ready to face his brother by hedging his bets and covering his losses.

And, even after God dropped a ladder from heaven and promised, land, protection, and progeny, Jacob was still a bargainer. The acceptance he offered was conditional – hinging on God holding up his end of the deal.

And yet, God comes to this liar and louse to wrestle out his covenant promise. God chose to work-out creation's reclamation through flawed and fallen Jacob. Unbidden, God tracks down Jacob and takes him to the dirt and renames him.

The etymology of the name Israel is disputed. In a variety of places it seems to mean a variety of things. It can be translated as “one who strives with God” or “God strives” or “God rules” or “God preserves” or “God protects.”

But, what is clear is that in the name change God affirms his willingness to stay in the struggle with Jacob, with his people, and with his creation. It is as if there is recognition on God’s part that this reclamation project is going to be a long, difficult, and protracted battle.

From the banks of the river Jabbok,  
to captivity in Egypt,  
to a parting of the waters,  
to a barn in Bethlehem,  
to a splintered pole outside of Jerusalem,  
to a cold dark tomb,  
to wherever you sit this day.....  
God enters the fray to fight for his people.

And that, dear friends, is the heart of the gospel – that God would pull this messy world unto himself and fight for its healing. The stunning claim of scripture is that God keeps seeking after messed-up folks like you and me, keeps reaching out, and keeps pulling us in to fight for our healing.

God is the one who enters into this human scrum,  
even unto flesh and blood,  
even unto wrestling in the dark night of Gethsemane,  
even unto crucifixion,  
even unto death.

God is the one who is bloodied and beat.  
God is the one with a limp.

Frederick Buechner pictures it this way:

*Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of the defeat which is victory...*

Jacob limps.

I limp.

Maybe you do too.

But, the mystery of the gospel is that Jesus limps, too.

Whatever wound you bear, whatever scar you carry, whatever bruise makes you limp, God would share. Our identity is found in the God who names us and claims us and makes us his own. Therefore, may whatever struggle you face be for you *Peniel* – the place where you see God face to face. And may you find your place in the company of those who limp.

Thanks be to God. Amen.