

Where the Wild Things Are
Pentecost 9A
PPC
2 August 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5
Genesis 32:22-31

Ten years ago I had a total hip replacement. Despite my time in physical therapy, my gait had not returned to normal after two months. My home, at the time, was in Ellicottville, NY, home to the ski resort, Holiday Valley. As a consequence of that, there were several massage therapists in town. One of them, a good friend, suggested I see her as her methods included stretching muscles as well as a massage. On my first visit to her, as she pushed deeply into my thigh muscle, she let me know that she didn't use the "F" word often but after massaging my leg, she felt she had to. Prepared to hear her swear at me, she surprised me by saying that the "F" word she was going to use was "fear." She felt fear in my leg muscles.

Since having the hip replacement surgery, I was terrified of having the new part of my femur pop out of the socket so I was walking timidly and in fear. As a result of that tension in my legs, when it came to walking, I was out of alignment. With great strength, she stretched my leg out and over my body as I cried out in pain and fear. When I left that office, I no longer had a limp.

This experience has left me totally sympathetic to the story of Jacob who wrestles with one who leaves him with a pain in his hip. The monsters of fear occupy that space where we confront those fears.

As we continue our OT reading this week about the life and times of our protagonist, Jacob, we come to one of the most well-known stories of human struggle with the divine. We hear of how Jacob wrestled with the man, or the angel (the Hebrew word for man, "*ish*" is the

word used for this adversary) and we know we are being offered an insight into our own spiritual journeys.

Deep-seated family hostilities have characterized Jacob's life up until this moment in his life. Isaac and Rebekah played favorites and as a result, Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, hate each other. Remember that Jacob went to live with Laban, his father-in-law, because he was running away from his father and brother who had wanted to kill him.

Perhaps there is a genetic connection to fooling people in this family. His uncle, Laban, tricks Jacob into marrying Leah and not Rachel, who is the object of Jacob's desires. Laban gets 14 years of labor out of Jacob before Jacob finally is allowed to wed Rachel. By this point in the story, though, Jacob is now married to both women. Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, in today's story Jacob has fled Laban under cover of night, managing to leave with a significant number of goods.

On this night he encounters an unknown creature, he awaits reunion with his brother, Esau. The last he knew, Esau wanted to kill him. In a manner characteristic of this trickster and liar, Jacob has also arranged for his entire family, along with all his earthly possessions, to encamp on the opposite side of the river from where he lies. He has put them, in other words, between himself and Esau. Perhaps, he thinks, if Esau has some spiteful plans made, he might not carry them out with the women and children in the way.

Jacob has a lot of fear on this night. Now, alone in the wilderness, separated by the river Jabbok from his family and considerable wealth, physically exhausted and deeply anxious about Esau, Jacob falls into a deep sleep on the banks of the river.

During the night his real struggles begin. Don't we all know about these night time struggles? From seemingly out of nowhere, monsters emerge, taunting us with all our imagined

and real sins. While we are not certain of the true nature of this creature that appears to him, we can ascertain that this thing with which Jacob wrestles is not only an apparition outside of him; it is also something within himself that he's fighting. I imagine that somewhere, buried deep in his soul, Jacob knew all the wrongs he had committed against so many of those whom he loved. His fear looms large before his eyes as he anxiously considers all that Esau has a right to do to get even with him. The struggle continues until daybreak.

As the sun begins creeping over the horizon, "the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob" (32:25). What does this mean? How can it be, if this is a divine being, that a mere mortal can be winning the fight? Is there a message for us here, telling us that we can win against our fears? That if we prevail, we can defeat the evil that lurks in the hearts of us all? Jacob is winning. So, this man strikes him on the hip socket. He cripples Jacob with a blow to his hip that makes Jacob limp for the rest of his life.

Jacob, good old Jacob, even in the face of this blow, as he still has the man pinned to the ground is insistent that before he will let this figure go, he wants a blessing. Again with the blessing! Jacob needs a lot of reassurance. While the man refuses to give Jacob his name, he does bless Jacob and give him a new name, Israel; a name that means *the one who strives with God*.

At some point in our lives we all arrive at the Jabbok. Filled with fear, perhaps, afraid of the future, we only have one decision to make. Will we wrestle with what scares us or will we choose to become blind? In psychological parlance, we repress all that we don't want to know about ourselves. We refuse to acknowledge our shadow side. We act out against others in ways that are hurtful to them and to us. We forget our dreams and our hopes. From this story we learn that if we choose to wrestle, we may be left with a scar but we will also receive a blessing.

Have you ever thought that in your struggles the point isn't that you win or that you receive all that you want? The important point of this story is that you engage in the striving with God. We will never have all the answers and be perfect people. Do you consider that in the striving you come face to face with God? That is certainly how Jacob sees this struggle for he names the place, *Peniel* - "saying, For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved" (32:30). Tradition in the OT says that those who see God's face will die. And yet, Jacob has lived. Truth won't kill you. To discover it though, you must struggle.

Jacob is in a panic on this night before he is to meet his brother for the first time in years. He knows that he has behaved badly toward his brother. He knows that he has stolen from Laban so that now he is a wealthy man. Yet, he is defensive of his actions. We certainly don't hear that he is willing to restore to Esau what he has stolen from him. His struggle with himself is that he wants to keep all that he has and also be the person he has always been and have Esau love him. Or at least not be angry with him. Maybe even be willing to look past all that Jacob has done to him. I imagine Jacob conjuring up all the wrongs that have been done to him and blaming Esau. Jacob is angry at Esau because it's easier to be angry at someone else than to confront all that he has done. His struggle that night is a confrontation with all the things that he holds onto as having wounded him.

How many of us would rather hold on to the "way it was" than to confront our limitations? I look around this world today and I want to weep. So many of us dying needlessly of COVID 19. Federal agents attacking protestors in Portland. Our past actions have been responsible for the lynching tree. Women are not allowed to take charge of their reproductive health. Old, old wounds that we wish weren't there that we've only covered over so that we don't have to wrestle with the sins that our ancestors perpetrated against the native Americans

and the Blacks. We have been Christians who have forgotten what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We care more about being right and we use violence to beat back the forces that want to make changes. We want to avoid this painful struggle with the divine and so we play the blame game. We have to find someone else who is responsible for what's wrong because I didn't own slaves. We don't want to spend the rest of our days walking with a limp. We have worked hard and we deserve our rewards.

“Jacob,” writes Joan Chittester, “does what all of us must do, if, in the end, we too are to become true.” Jacob confronts his demons; he literally wrestles them to the ground. He recognizes, though, that he hasn't won anything if he doesn't have God's blessing. He is willing to risk pain and a life-long handicap for that blessing. Do you imagine that he won? In this situation, is there a victory to be had?

In the end, Jacob's true opponent, his Other, renames him and blesses him. The name and the blessing are gained for no other reason than his strength and persistence: he holds on until dawn. There is, however, no question of an exchange of anything. The adversary will not disclose his name which means that Jacob can have no power over him. What Jacob can give or ascribe to him *makes no difference to this Other*. The new name and blessing, though, make all the difference to Jacob. Jacob becomes the paradigm for the spirituality of struggle. For even though he prevails and gets his blessing, he must walk with a limp for the rest of his life.

Life for Jacob after this encounter doesn't become the perfect life. His daughter, Dinah, is raped; two of his sons, Reuben and Judah commit incest, and as if to imitate his own parents, Jacob plays favorite with his son, Joseph, sewing seeds of fraternal enmity for all. And still, God blesses Jacob, or Israel, naming this family the new nation. Maybe in the end, the important thing is that you have struggled.

Fear comes in different forms. Like the fear lodged in my leg muscles, it can cause us to lose our alignment. It was a struggle for me to regain my trust in my own strength but if I wanted to be blessed, I had to engage in the work that it took.

We will all be called to wrestle with God and find our own Peniel - that place where we will meet God. Let Jacob's wrestling stand as an example of how our struggle can last for a night, but, by daybreak, let us discover that all along God only intended to bless us. Let that be hope for us when we arrive at the Jabbok of our lives.

AMEN.