

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 32

I love a good bizarre Old Testament story. Such stories are interesting, and puzzling, and in the end, I believe, relatable. Relatable, because our own journeys involve their own struggles and conflicts and drama, and if recorded and read about by others, might have a similar puzzling character, bizarre aspects of how God managed to intervene in our journeys, trying to get our attention and direct our efforts for his purposes.

God intervenes for Jacob, but in an unexpected way. Like Jonah being swallowed and then regurgitated by a whale, or like Daniel sitting in the lion's den surrounded by hungry lions, Jacob has a story about how he came face to face with what ought to destroy one and survived. A story about wrestling with a man, who he comes to understand is actually God. "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The word translated preserved has a sense of being saved or delivered, of living to tell about it.

"For I have seen God face to face." "The face of God" is an anthropomorphized expression that refers to the full presence of God. The "face of God" is how God's presence in the temple is referred to - that presence in Temple's inner sanctum, the holy of holies, which was separated and blocked off from where people could approach, because it was understood that one cannot see the face of God and live. Moses, when encountering God on the mountain asks only that God's back would pass before him, not the full presence, and even so he comes down the mountain lit up like a lightning bug.

If you remember, Jacob had an earlier encounter with God when he was on his way to Haran some twenty years ago now. It was at Bethel, when he has the dream of angels descending and ascending and he erects the memorial stone. There God renewed the promise of people and land and renewed the call on Jacob to come back to this land. Well, God encounters Jacob yet again as Jacob is heading back to Canaan. A fresh encounter, wrestling with Jacob, leaving him with a sense of divine encounter and with a limp. This time, Jacob doesn't hear the promises, doesn't get any new revelation, just gets attacked in the night and wrestles till daybreak when some sort of peace arrangement is made, and Jacob comes away with a new name, a limp, and the awe of divine encounter.

This story really builds and finds its climax from the larger story that leads up to it, especially the previous chapter. I considered having Dee read all fifty-five verses of chapter 31 first and then the whole chapter of 32, but that might be a lot to survive, she too might come away limping.

Here are the cliff notes: that on top of the fourteen years that Jacob serves Laban for his wives, Laban keeps Jacob tied up another six years while they make deals to allow Jacob to develop his own flocks and herds. Basically, Jacob is trying to build up his own wealth, his own family, resources, entourage. And despite Laban's underhanded deals, between Jacob's conniving and God's blessing, God makes Jacob's efforts prosper. Laban's flocks and herds flourish. And so, Laban benefits from this blessing and the burgeoning of their flocks and herds, as long as Jacob is with him. So, Laban tries to keep Jacob tied up there as long as possible. But, eventually Jacob determines it is time to leave. So, Jacob flees at an opportune moment.

As they go, Rachel adds insult to injury by taking the family gods/idols. Why is this important? The family gods or idols were akin to a land title, like holding the deed, like walking off with the family will and making yourself the executer. Something of this nature. Gods were tied to land, tied to blessing. So, the family idols/gods/figurines were the deeds to all they possessed. So, like Jacob stealing the older brother's birthright, Rachel, the younger sister has walked off with the deeds to all her father has, has asserted the place to inherit and arbitrate the family's wealth. Quite a couple!

When Laban realizes this has happened, he pursues and catches up to them. After all, at this point Jacob is traveling as a small village, not exactly a quick moving pack. Laban catches up and makes grand accusations and tries with all his wives to make them come back. He, in part, does not want his daughters and grandchildren moving away from him, where he may never see them again. Further, he doesn't want his money-maker leaving, the one who has brought God's blessing and prosperity. He certainly doesn't want the deeds or rights to all his possessions being carried off. Well, tempers settle down. Jacob and Laban come to an agreement, Laban agrees to let them go, they make a covenant of peace promising not to do harm to each other, and Laban returns home while Jacob continues on.

Phew, that is over. Jacob has endured and managed to finally get out from under Laban, and he has gone from a single man to full family with servants and oxen and herds and flocks and is now returning to the land of promise. But, Jacob has another liability as he heads back to the land, to this old territory. His brother, who he took the birthright from. Esau. So, he sends messengers to Esau hoping to

establish a similar covenant of peace with Esau. But word comes back that Esau is on his way with four hundred men. “Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, ‘If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.’”

Jacob fears that Esau is coming for revenge. So, Jacob goes into his strategizing mode once more, separating his people and possessions, sending them in different directions, figuring out how he can neutralize and get out of this alive, or something of the family and resources he has built up will survive. He knows he cannot fight off four hundred men. “The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.²⁴ Jacob was left alone.”

And as Jacob is doing all this conspiring once again, this is when a man appears and wrestles with him till daybreak. And I think, Oh my goodness, Jacob, you must be tired. Constantly striving and strategizing and conniving as he tries to make his way. One grappling after another, one struggle after another. Will the wrestling ever stop? Will the struggling ever be over? “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

It is a fascinating story, a relatable story, as Jacob grapples not just with strong personalities, or with a sense of promise, or with traditions that favor the older and systems that would keep him bound in a type of family servitude that he must struggle against. It is story of Jacob grappling with all these things, but now he grapples with God himself. Grappling and wrestling for his own life, his own will and path, like he has all along, wrestling to get what he feels he is destined for.

So, what is this wrestling with God about? It is a story that like many Hebrew stories, is laconic, lacking a lot of detail and full of lots of gaps. It is in counterpoint to the very detailed stories leading up to this about how Jacob amasses his wealth under Laban. But here, we are not given much for detail or interpretation. Just that Jacob wrestles with God, is renamed in the process, tries to get the upper hand on God by wanting God’s name, and ends up limping away, surviving but with a living memory of the encounter.

Now this is one of those stories where traditional exegesis falls flat a little. The gaps in the story are too great. One way to approach the story is to look at it along with other similar stories, stories where a chosen person of God is attacked or accosted by God or an angel or emissary of God. There are at least a couple other

clear parallels. One is Exodus four where Moses is on his way back to Egypt from his sojourn in Midian following the burning bush incident. Moses is on the way and in the night, the text tells us that the Lord tried to kill him. Moses' wife Zipporah intercedes by cutting him, the blood of which seems to abate the murder attempt. Another rather peculiar and laconic story.

Another example still is the story of Balaam the prophet in Numbers 22. In that story, Balaam is on his way when an Angel of the Lord stands in the road bearing a sword. But while Balaam can't see the angel, his donkey does and won't go further and Balaam's attempts to get the donkey to move causes the donkey to collide with a wall thus crushing Balaam's foot. In Balaam's case, it is the donkey that intervenes to save his life.

Now, you may be wondering in the year 2023, why I am using your time to talk about these rather strange and somewhat disturbing stories of God attacking his own messengers or chosen ones. What is the thrust or the point of all this? Well, in each of these stories of endangerment, there is a thrust. It is God exerting God's own will, God's own desires, God's own claim upon the person, the claim that they be God's and God's own. In a world of divided allegiances, of doing what it takes to get by, of struggling and grappling, or of being bounced back and forth by insecurities, God lays claim to each of these people's lives.

In the case of Moses, Moses had run away and lives in fear of Pharaoh, who earlier in that narrative tried to kill Moses and who exerted power and authority over Moses' life. In Exodus four, God claims authority over Moses. Moses no longer serves nor fears Pharaoh, only God and God's calling and purposes. In the case of Balaam, he is something of a prophet for hire. Balak, a foreign king, had commissioned him to prophesy against Israel. And God says that you will no longer give word or promise divine favor based upon the highest price or any other authority, but shall serve the Lord and the Lord's people alone.

And in our Genesis reading, where Jacob has been so prone to connive and strategize and morph and mold to whatever it takes to get by, whatever it takes to get where he needs to go, he risks becoming shapeless, integrity-less, committed to only his own instinct and ego, his own needs and goals. God wrestles and grapples with Jacob, and while Jacob will survive and contend, he cannot overcome the Lord. No amount of wrestling or conniving will allow him to ultimately overcome the Lord. He will come face to face with God and will come to know his place, to carry a limp to remind him of his limitations and God's graciousness that allowed him to survive. For I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.

In each case, God solidifies the main character's connection and calling to God. The main character carries some reminder of the encounter, a bodily reminder and not just a rock or memorial. The main character now is more closely connected to God's will and God's sovereignty. Has God ever done a similar thing in your journey, using some travail to draw you closer to himself, laying claim on your person and your life trajectory?

The difference between Jacob and these others is that Jacob has no intercessor. He grapples with God face to face. He is his own intercessor.

As I wrote in the mid-week update, we sometimes speak of surrender to God, and we speak of rebellion to God. We can either fully submit, relinquishing our will, or we can fully rebel, fully claiming our will, but what of the middle ground that Jacob seems to find? – to grapple with God. To wrestle with God. To bring one's personality and questions and inclinations and triggers and traumas and work it out on the ground, wrestling all night to daybreak. And to come out of it with a new identity, a new name, and to be more closely bound to the Lord. Is that not an appropriate model for faith?

It seems to be, as far as I can tell. But in the grappling and the wrestling, we not only encounter God, not only do we discover our own strength and perseverance through this grappling, but we also come to the end of ourselves, and have some emotional encounter with what it is like to be in the presence of great power and to be spared, and to be blessed.

Down through history we have often misunderstood what God wants most. What we have learned is that God is not ultimately concerned with blood line or nation, as our Romans reading reminds us. And we have also learned that what God is most interested in is not a set of doctrines or beliefs that one signs off on. What God wants most is for us to be his, to walk in step with him, to relate, to engage, to even grapple with God. For us to be more closely committed and prepared for God's purposes, for us to shed all other allegiances and motives and loyalties. Because with those relational connections, God can teach and direct and use us.

I don't know what struggles and grappling you are dealing with in your own life, whether that grappling is with others, or with systems, or with God. I don't know what threats you are facing to all you have worked for or valued. But I do believe that God's intent with each of us is the same as it was for Moses, and Balaam, and Jacob – that we would be his and more closely bound to God's presence and purposes; laying claim upon us, because he loves us. We are God's and bound to God's purposes.

Genesis 32: Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

God's Election of Israel

(Gen 25:19–23)

9 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. ⁹ For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son."

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel

I dare not face my brother in the morning,
I dare not look upon the things I've done,
Dare not ignore a nightmare's dreadful warning,
Dare not endure the rising of the sun.
My family, my goods, are sent before me,
I cannot sleep on this strange river shore,
I have betrayed the son of one who bore me,
And my own soul rejects me to the core.

But in the desert darkness one has found me,
Embracing me, He will not let me go,
Nor will I let Him go, whose arms surround me,
Until he tells me all I need to know,
And blesses me where daybreak stakes its claim,
With love that wounds and heals; and with His name.