

Genesis 32:22-31

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Wrestling With God

Well good morning, my friends, and welcome again to this service of worship. It remains a deep blessing and gift to be able to gather in this way. I am so incredibly grateful to the Clarks, and all the kiddos who have offered their own sermons these past few weeks. It has been a deep grace to receive these words of comfort and challenge and joy and wisdom from all of you.

This story of Jesus and his disciples has always hit home with me. As a person with anxious proclivities, I sometimes feel like I'm running around in a boat being tossed in a storm, yelling at God and Jesus, "Like, do y'all even care about what's going on here?"

And my sense of God's response back to me is usually something like: "Now, you know I care. So go take a nap." And I'm like, "Oh right, a nap would be good."

This is my life in a nutshell, especially in 2020. As the pandemic shows no sign of letting up. Civil unrest, economic uncertainty, and gross inequality and injustice are brewing a storm like we've never seen. And it can feel like we're the disciples, getting tossed around in a violent storm while Jesus takes a nap.

I will say though, considering the circumstances, as a community, we are doing okay. We're experiencing some conflict, within and certainly from without, but we're engaged with one another. We're connected. And we're healthy.

We're doing the that best we can. And ya know, sometimes I feel pretty overwhelmed, which I'm sure many of you are experiencing as well. And sometimes a nap is just what we need.

And also, we know that sometimes, it's just not possible to sleep through the storm. Sometimes the struggle keeps us up through the night. What word does God have for us on those nights?

With this question in mind, let us turn back to the Scripture I read from Genesis, in which we find Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, struggling all through the night, preparing for a rather dicey family reunion, which is to set to occur at daybreak.

There's a lot to unpack here, so put on your tabloid glasses or soap opera hat, because this is juicy. You see, Jacob had a twin named Esau. And Esau was born first, but Jacob came right after him because he was holding tightly onto the heel of Esau. Later, Jacob tricked Esau into giving him his inheritance *and* tricked his father into giving him the blessing reserved for the firstborn. This trickery forced him to flee his homeland where he entered into a covenant with a man named Laban, who would become his father in law, twice over. Basically, these two engaged in mutual trickery for 20 years.

That is until Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, decide they'd had enough. They sought to put their tricky ways behind them and set off to Jacob's homeland, seeking to be reconciled with and welcomed home by Esau. Jacob tried to bribe his brother with gifts, which he sent ahead of them. But as their caravan was coming up to this river, the Jabbok, they learned that just on the other side, where Esau's land began, waited Esau and 400 men. I told you this was a soap opera.

So Jacob, a bit at a loss for what to do. He had run out of tricks and unless he could come up with something good, he was likely to meet his death at daybreak. So he takes one last, long night to prepare for this family reunion. And this Scripture, which I read for you is the story of that long night.

And so he enters into this night, probably thinking he will take the night to come up with his next trick. But instead, he finds himself in a struggle with a man unknown to him. This man wrestles with him throughout the night, but neither seems to be able to defeat the other, and as day is breaking, and Jacob's time is running out, this assailant touches him on the hip, and puts his hip out of place.

Now, as someone who has chronic hip problems, let me tell you that this is no small injury. When the hip goes out of place, everything goes out of place. Thus, the fact that he is able to hold on speaks to how badly and desperately he seeks to be blessed. Because by this point, he has come to understand with whom he is wrestling and what it is that he genuinely needs.

"What is your name?" asks the mysterious assailant. "Jacob" he says.

In Hebrew, names have meaning. They describe the character of the person. Jacob's name comes from the root of heel, because he was grabbing his brother's heel, because he came into the world a trickster and tricked his way through most of his life.

"What is your name?" "Jacob."

In saying his name, he admits who he has been. The trickster. The deceiver. The one who grabs by the heel and takes what is not his. For the first time in a long time, maybe his whole life, Jacob lays aside his ways of deception and trickery, and is honest with himself and with his God about who he has been and what he has done.

It is at this moment that God finally blesses him. Because of his honesty, his willingness to look himself in the mirror, metaphorically speaking, of course, and fully and completely confess the truth about who he has been, God speaks forth into being who he shall become: Israel, the one who strives with God and humans and yet prevails.

One biblical scholar says this about Jacob's epic night: "At the Jabbok, the Being [that is God] gives being. Jacob is not blessed because of what he has or what he receives. He is blessed because of, and certainly in spite of, who he is and of who he will become as a result of this struggle."¹

Jacob is blessed not because of who he's been, or what he's done or left undone, but because of who God is. He is blessed not because of what he has, what's he's able to trick his way into getting, but because he chose to engage in this struggle to become who God created him to be.

This struggle, that by the way, will leave him forever marked. For the rest of his life, he will walk with a limp. And this limp, a worldly impediment, serves as a heavenly reminder of the intimate encounter he had with God and the blessing of a new name. A new identity. A door opened to new possibility. The hope of new life made possible on account of this struggle of becoming.

He emerged that next day a changed being. He is transformed from a man who relied on his own wits and trickery, to one who is honest about who and whose he is. One who will continue to struggle and experience strife, but one who will prevail. Not because of his own strength or power, for he is a marked man.

This new being will prevail because God prevails. He will be presented with the possibility of a new relationship with his brother and with his homeland. He will be made new, not because of what he was able to do, but because of God is able to do.

Friends, this is about individual transformation, surely. Any of us who've gone through any kind of existential crisis can surely relate to this description of Jacob's struggle. The pain of really looking myself in the mirror, being honest about who I am, and committing to do the hard work of becoming who I want to be. This is side

¹ Gary V. Simpson, "Pastoral Perspective on Genesis 32:22-31," *Feasting on the World: Year A*.

splitting work, and this struggle of Jacob's resonates deeply with that kind of internal work.

But this is not just a story about individual transformation, for this mythic struggle tells the tale of how Israel came to be. This is an epic origin story about the people and the place set high upon a hill to be a beacon to all nations of the earth. To be God's chosen and blessed peoples, through whom God would bless the whole earth.

This story speaks to the struggle of communal transformation, and that's why it feels so real and significant right now. Friends, we are living in a time of transition. We are awaiting the dawn, longing to cross over into something new, and while we wait, we are wrestling.

Like Jacob, we are struggling through the night. We have been seized by our God, and we are holding on for dear life. Pleading with God to bless us, to equip us, to reveal to us what is right and good and what we should do when the sun rises and we must face our brother, whom we have wronged.

But we are afraid of what the dawn will bring. We are afraid of what we might lose. We are pleading with God to give us power and cunning, because we are afraid of who we might become.

In the words of Assata Shakur: "We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."²

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

My friends, as we struggle through this long, dark night, let us remember that God will challenge us to be honest about who we are, what we've done, and how we've done it. But we don't have to be afraid.

For God also promises to bless us with new names, new purpose, and new possibilities. We will enter into our newness as a marked people, but we will prevail, not by own power, but by the love and the compassion and grace of God.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.

² Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*.