

²² The same night, Jacob 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 Jacob answered, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he 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, 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.

Genesis 32:22-32

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"The Unknown Traveler"

Pastor Amy Terhune

I've been in "professional" ministry now for 24 years, and in all that time, no one has ever asked me my favorite scripture lesson. Maybe people think that as a servant of God, I shouldn't have a favorite. And while there are many that touch my heart and speak to my soul, I'll have to disappoint that crowd and admit that in fact, I do have a favorite scripture lesson. It's been my favorite since I first heard it read to me at a Vacation Bible School when I was probably about 8 or 9 years old. It was this story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. And even at 8 or 9 years old, I already knew that life could be hard. Passing a math test, writing a good book report, dealing with other kids on the playground, trying to figure out who I was as I grew – adults sometimes look at childhood struggles with nostalgia and a longing for simpler times. Which can make a kid feel small, like the real struggles they face are trivial or insignificant. But growing up is hard. Being a kid is hard. Sometimes I think it must be harder today than it was when I was a kid. Who can say. But I remember being told at 8 or 9 that being a Christian is hard. Letting God work in us, change us, grow us – that's hard. But I was also told that I could do it. That I was strong. That God was with me. And I appreciated being trusted with that. I appreciated being encouraged to wrestle, to struggle, to ask questions, to make mistakes, to embrace faith, to go after wisdom and understanding, to keep going through what's hard. Not every church will trust a kid with that. And still today, if you ask me my favorite, it's not the parables or the psalms or even the resurrection, although I love those deeply. No, it's the invitation to struggle, to grow, to change, and even more, the promise that God meets us in all that; that God is there in the dark night of the soul. That's what still speaks most profoundly to my spirit.

Now, I'm fully away as I share this that there's someone out there shaking their head in bafflement – someone for whom wrestling with God is dangerous, if not disastrous to the spirit. There's someone who thinks Jacob needs to let go, to submit to God's will, to stop struggling. Jacob is a bad example, they'll warn me. This is not a positive story, they'll tell me. You're drawing the wrong lesson, they'll tell me. And they aren't wrong that sometimes there is a time to let go and stop fighting; to draw a deep breath, trust, and submit. Knowing when to hold on and when to let go isn't always easy. I get that well enough. But you'll never convince me that wrestling with God is a bad thing.

In that, at least, I'm not alone. Charles Wesley shared my sentiments. If you turn in the blue United Methodist Hymnals to #387, you'll encounter all 14 verses of Charles Wesley's original poem about the

Unknown Traveler, which many believe to be somewhat autobiographical, and which is widely regarded as the best hymn Charles Wesley ever wrote. “The hymn’s central theme is the intense struggle attendant in the changing of one’s own heart and being... Stanzas 1-8 contain the questions of one who seeks to know God’s nature, and stanzas 9-14 affirm God’s ‘nature and name is love’. Wesley’s faith journey, as told through his hymn, ends with the revelation that God is pure universal love.” [from *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* by Carlton R. Young (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) pg. 295.] But he only gets there through the struggle and the exploration.

If we go back and look at the scripture lesson itself, I’m always fascinated by what the lesson doesn’t tell us. Namely, it doesn’t tell us what Jacob is thinking. We have to figure it out based on what he does. So what happens? The action starts right away: that same night, Jacob got up.... Okay, so he’s made camp. It’s nighttime. He’s in his tent, surrounded by wives and kids and servants and herds and all his stuff. Mind you, he’s a wealthy man at this point in his life, so it’s a full camp. But he gets up in the night, and he takes his wives and his kids and his servants and his herds and all his stuff, and he moves camp. Why? I truly don’t know. It’s a mystery.

Let’s fill in a little background here before we go on, though. Jacob is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel—the one from whom an entire nation takes its name. But he didn’t start out as Israel. He started out as a second-born son with a significant inferiority complex and little or no conscience, as far as we can tell. His birthname says it all: Jacob means ‘trickster’; or more accurately, ‘supplanter’, as in, one who supplants themselves into titles, benefits, or rewards to which they have no rightful claim. It’s a fitting name, if an unflattering one. After all, Jacob is the one who steals his brother’s birthright and blessing. How can such things be stolen? In that culture, they could—they were gifts that, once given, could not be revoked. He tricks his brother—who is bigger, stronger, and far less intelligent—with a good pot of soup. He tricks his father—who is nearly blind—with a handy costume, a bit of acting, and some help from Mom. Jacob has made it through life thus far by manipulating people and situations. Is he in control? Well, he thinks so. But he gets caught in his trickery, and is forced to flee the wrath of his brother.

He finds refuge for a time with his Uncle Leban, in whom Jacob meets his match when it comes to conniving and duplicitous behavior. He falls in love with Rachel, and agrees to work seven years to earn her as his wife. But when his seven years are up, Uncle Leban sends in the older, homelier Leah to be his wife instead, and Jacob doesn’t figure it out until the following morning. Not quite sure how he misses that, but I’m not going there. So he works another seven years to get Rachel. In the meantime, he uses his own considerable intelligence and chicanery to basically trick his uncle out of a whole lot of wealth—sheep and goats and cows and camels and so forth. He’s worn out his welcome with his uncle and God seizes the moment: Return to the land of your fathers, and I will bless you, says God. There’s only one problem: he’s still got a brother that, to the best of his knowledge, still wants him dead! Just that afternoon, Jacob had dispatched messengers with rich gifts to appease the brother he hadn’t seen in decades, and word came back that Esau and 400 soldiers are come to meet him. That’s not a welcoming committee. That’s an army. It’s not unreasonable for Jacob to assume, then, that Esau’s rage had not abated in the intervening years, and knowing that, he can’t sleep. At least, that’s my take.

Now, I’ll be honest. I really don’t know what happens here. I cannot, for the life of me, figure out why Jacob would send his family across the ford of the river and remain alone on the other side. I’m not even sure which side he’s on. Is he on the same side that Esau and his 400 men are on? Is he standing between his family and the perceived threat? That would be noble. Or has he sent his family as a buffer, thinking, surely Esau won’t kill women and children. That would be pretty darn cowardly, frankly, but also (if we’re honest) is much more in character with Jacob who runs from danger. Mind you, the text doesn’t say. It says that the women and kids and the flocks and the stuff are one side, and Jacob is alone on the other. And Esau is out there somewhere.

Here's another question: why on earth is Jacob alone in the wilderness in the dark? I mean, that's just foolish. Really. I've been camping, and I try to hold it till morning rather than get up and go by myself to the bathroom in the dark. Cause one doesn't know what could be out there. Bears, wolves, cougars, or my biggest fear: skunks. So why is Jacob alone in the wilderness in the dark? Heck if I know! But he is.

Now some of you may be quick to point out that perhaps his being alone in the wilderness in the dark is symbolic. Maybe that's where his is, spiritually speaking. And I won't argue with you there. Clearly, that is where he is, spiritually speaking. He's been in the dark in the wilderness, spiritually speaking, for an awfully long time. But all the same, don't write this off to pure allegory. It's not that simple. The author of Genesis communicating this story clearly intends us to know that there is a very real physical dimension to all of this, and we can't ignore it. After all, just about any doctor can tell you that when we're in the wilderness, in the dark, spiritually speaking, our body is being assaulted by a vast array of very real issues: the appetite wanes, the heart beats faster, hands shake, guts get all knotted up, sleep is hard to come by, everything aches, we can't concentrate, desire falls off, our temper gets short, our ability to have fun or see anything good in life is compromised. If you haven't been in that state or something like it, call yourself blessed. Most of us have.

So Jacob's alone in the dark in the wilderness. Who knows why. And a man comes and wrestles with him until daybreak. Now, lest you think that some gentleman happened along and politely inquired if Jacob would like to tussle for a while to pass the time, let me note that the English translations have a hard time communicating what the Hebrew implies, which is that Jacob is attacked, caught unawares. There are no rules; there are no referees; it's a no-holds-barred kind of thing. Which, in some sense, is a little troubling. Because you know and I know that Jacob's attacker is God in human form—the same God who said “go back home to the land of your father and I will be with you.” Well, I doubt this is the kind of companionship Jacob had in mind. On the way out as a young man, God gave him a dream and a sense of the holy. But twenty years later, on the way back in, God is not so gentle. If Jacob is going to take his place in God's plan, he's going to have to stop burning bridges and start building some. He's going to have to stop running every time he's in trouble. He's going to have to face consequences. He's going to have to develop courage and take responsibility for his life.

That's where Jacob is at—the painful process of reckoning with his past and admitting his need. How do I know that? Because his divine opponent asks for his name. As if God doesn't know! But Jacob needs to own it. Dr. J. Howard Olds explains it this way: “Jacob says, “My name is Jacob.” The trickster, supplanter, grabber, heel. “My name is Jacob. My father did not like me. My brother cannot stand me. My mother sent me away.” “What is your name?” “My name is Jacob. If I cannot be loved, at least I'll be in control.” “What is your name?” “My name is Jacob!” Driven, deceitful, successful, powerful, lonely, afraid. Jacob was not very proud of his name. But he gives it. He owns it. “My name is Jacob!” And God says, “not anymore.” [adapted from “Wrestling Alone at Night” by Dr. J. Howard Olds, www.Sermons.com.]

Shakespeare once said, ‘a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’, but the ancient Hebrew people would have taken serious issue with Shakespeare's assertion. In their culture, a name contained the very essence of its bearer. Proper names—of places, people or things—were laden with heritage, history, or particular character traits. Blessing the name of an individual imbued the bearer of that name with power. Jacob – the “trickster”, the “supplanter” – has once again manipulated the situation, swindling his opponent and supplanting himself into a blessing that doesn't belong to him.

But consider this: if there's great power in a name, how much more power is there in one who can change a name? Wouldn't that mean that one who has the power to change a name also has the power to change the past, the future, one's very character? “Jacob is renamed Israel, which means, “one who strives with God”. In the changing of his name, he is released from his past and given the future that was promised. The supplanter is planted firmly into God's plan, the heel becomes a healer, the trickster is transformed into a treasure.” [adapted from “Wrestling Alone at Night” by Dr. J. Howard Olds, www.Sermons.com.]

And Jacob must sense the power he's dealing with. He's not given his opponent's name. He's left on the banks of the Jabbok, changed and blessed, injured and awestruck. And as he limps along, he realizes that the God of his fathers, the God he never really knew before, was right there, 6 inches in front of his face, and he lives to tell it.

I heard once about a boy named Jack, who had the kind of dad that every other parent in town grew frustrated with. His dad was the one yelling "win, win, win" at the Little League game when everyone else was reminding their kids that games are for fun, not winning. His dad was the one who would groan in embarrassment at the school play when Jack forgot his line. His dad was the one who always wondered why Jack took second instead of first. His dad was the one who never seemed to be able to relate to his kid, who only showed what might be called love when Jack achieved uncompromised success. And thus, Jack was the kid that every other parent privately worried for, prayed for. Now it's easy for us to see Jack's father as not worth giving the time of day to, but as a child, Jack did not have the critical thinking skills to understand that his father was misguided or that there was more than one way to measure success.

He learned instead what it was that pleased his father and he learned it well. He learned ambition, he learned hard work, he learned "win". The good grades led to the Ivy League education, and to a successful career. But it never seemed quite good enough. When his father died suddenly at age 67, Jack had still never heard one word of unconditional love from him. Yet that push, push, push, win, win, win drive had become so ingrained in Jack that it continued to constrain him, although he thought about it a bit more critically now. He knew that there had been no chance to resolve things with his father before his death. He knew that his drive to success had kept him from dating, marrying, developing deep, meaningful friendships, or staying connected to family. He knew something in his life was missing. He tried to struggle with it, to analyze it, to purge himself of his feelings, to try and figure out why he was so unhappy. He had everything money could buy: houses (plural), cars, vacations, gadgets galore. He had bought a posh catamaran cruiser—a big, luxurious yacht full of Champaign, shrimp, classical music, and caviar. One evening, he took it out just as night was falling, and it grew very dark. The moon was only a sliver and the black water of the Atlantic surrounded him. Rage and anxiety had been building in him since before he could remember, and the darkness around him seemed heavy. It seemed to symbolize his uneasiness. And even though he knew it wasn't rational, he started to speed that yacht along, as if he could use it to pierce the darkness. But there was no light to be found. Finally, he reached the point of exhaustion, and he turned off the motor, paced the deck of the silent catamaran wrestling with the rage and the grief in the darkness for a while, and then threw back his head and yelled up to the silent, dark, heavens, "IS THIS GOOD ENOUGH?"

And that was the moment Jack first noticed the stars—timeless in the skies, the mariners' guides for centuries, something bigger than his father had been, made by someone bigger than his father had ever been. He saw the stars reflected in the water, in the windows of the boat, on the face of his watch, and he began to perceive something closer than he had ever imagined. Within a year, the catamaran was gone, as were the houses, the cars, the gadgets. The name Jack was left behind, too. He entered the priesthood and took on the name Father Jacob. That black night, in the suffering and the agony, Jack let go of the pressures of one father, and accepted the grace of a greater one. He grappled in the darkness and lost a fight. But in the losing, Jack discovered that the labor to be born again is just as hard as was to be born in the first place, and just as worth it. He limped into the dawning realization that instead of being way out there somewhere, there was a God he never knew 6 inches in front of his face, holding him in his arms, calling him to live and to tell the story of the new man he'd become. And he did. And it was hard. And it was good. And so may it be for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.