

“You Have Wrestled with God...and Come Through”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 31, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 32: 22-31

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.

Face-to-face

While on vacation we visited with many friends and family;

it was great to go and great to come home.

While in New York we took a day trip to Cooperstown

to experience the Baseball Hall of Fame.

We did not know until we arrived there that it was the weekend

when new Hall of Famers would be inducted.

Retired all-star players were everywhere.

As we walked into a pizza joint, Phil Niekro was walking out.

We went into a t-shirt store and there sat Dale Murphy.

His hair is sprinkled with grey but let me tell you,

he looks like he could still play outfield for the Braves.

The face-to-face encounters reminded me of the true story

of the woman who was on line in an ice cream store in coastal California.

She glanced over her shoulder

and discovered that the person standing behind her was Robert Redford.

She tried to be cool.

She said a casual hello,

turned back to the counter and put in her order.

She paid for her ice cream cone and left the store on shaky knees.

But when she got outside she realized that she had forgotten her ice cream cone.

She went back in, saw that Robert Redford was still there,

and then politely informed the clerk she had not gotten her ice cream.

“Oh, yes, you did,” said the young woman. *“You put it in your purse.”*

Face-to-face

Jacob came face-to-face with a supernatural opponent, and prevailed.

In the 32nd Chapter of Genesis we learn:

But Jacob stayed behind by himself,

and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled,

he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

The man said, “Let me go; it's daybreak.”

Jacob said, “I'm not letting you go ‘til you bless me.” (Gen. 32: 24-26 – The Message)

Our scripture for today

and for the unfolding of our lives

takes place late at night,

in the still of the night when it's just a soul

and the thoughts and memories that filter across the mind.

Jacob was all by his lonesome, on the eve of coming face-to-face

with the troubles he made for himself and others,

and he thought, *"I brought this on myself."*

Character flaws stared him in the face.

A difficult, sinful past haunted him still.

Jacob had just left Laban, his father-in-law, in less than amicable terms.

Before that

he had fled from the wrath of his older brother Essau and his father Isaac,

from whom he had tricked and finagled the family blessing.

Jacob's past was littered with burned bridges and broken relationships.

Now Jacob was returning to his homeland,

and the time had come to face the music.

Essau was coming out to meet him, riding hard and fast with 400 men,

seeking revenge, a dish best served cold.

If ever there was a soul troubled by his past

and unsure of how to cope with the future,

it was Jacob.

One sure thing Jacob had going for him was his belief

in the power and presence of God,

a living hope that permeated the core of his being.

Jacob could tap into a depth of faithfulness to the One True God

who carried him, sustained him, and empowered him

to correct the errors of his ways, to make amends,

to prevail and persevere, no matter what.

As Jacob told the story later to family and friends,

a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

Who was this man?

Was he a friend or a foe? Was his intent for the good or for ill?

Walter Brueggemann joins us in wondering,

was he a Bedouin thief, a common desert criminal

who violated ancient laws of hospitality

and attacked an unsuspecting traveler...?

Was the attacker the inner consciousness of Jacob,

so Jacob was, in effect, wrestling with his own guilt,

a shaky past and an unknown future,

struggling with his fears, his anxiety, his identity...?

Was this a dream that seemed so vivid to Jacob

that he had total recall of the conversation,

so real it displaced his hip,

so memorable it took on a physicality, and left Jacob with a
limp...?

Was the foe actually a friend,

one who is divine in thought and word and deed,

one who speaks the truth in love

and refuses to allow Jacob to be anything less

that all he can truly, deeply, fully become...?

Was the goal of the wrestler to break Jacob's spirit or to teach him a life lesson?

Was it to beat him down or to lift him up?

Was it to set him back or to remind Jacob

that within him all along is the will and faith to get right back up?

We do know one sure thing about the unnamed, mysterious wrestler:

Later, when Jacob told this story

he presented the wrestler in the night in a positive light.

He recognized that the arduous striving,

the difficult, painful, risky struggle was for his own good.

He sensed it, he saw it, and he demanded of the foe first his name and then a blessing.

While they fought and struggled Jacob appeared to be ignorant of who this stranger was,

until near the end, when in vs. 30

he recognized the divine authority with which the stranger spoke
a word of blessing upon 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.”*

“You have striven with divine and human beings, and have prevailed.”

Your new name will reflect your character: Scrapper-with-God

Survivor

Striver

By virtue of the new name,

Jacob recognizes that he is in the presence of the divine, of *Elohim*.

Regardless of who we the listener of this tale believes is the foe,

there is no doubt in Jacob’s mind that the adversary is *Elohim*,

either God or a representative of God.

Who else but God would know Jacob so personally, so intimately, so fundamentally,

one so flawed and sinful, a supplanter and deceiver and trickster,

a survivor and perseverer and striver,

and STILL see in him the potential to be the source of the name
Israel.

Are you with me?

Who else but God or God's representative could know you so well

and STILL think and believe that you have inside

what it takes to be chosen for greatness and beauty?

Who needs for you to be God's representative?

Who needs for you to see and believe in their inherent goodness and divinity?

Afterward Jacob called the place Peniel, saying,

"For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Peniel.

Peni-El.

The face of God.

Jacob believed that he had come face-to-face with *Elohim*

He had seen God...and not died!

Indeed, he had prevailed.

He was all the stronger for the struggle.

The irony of this story is not lost on us.

The Elohim, the rep or God or God in person,

holds up a mirror before Jacob,

a mirror that reflects Jacob's own flawed, sinful self,

and what does Jacob see?

The face of God. *Peniel. El. God. Peni-el* – the face of God.

This story is burned into our memories

– regardless of how many times we’ve heard it

or whether today’s hearing is the first time –

because it highlights the connection we sense and seek and strive for

between our understanding of ourselves as we truly are

and our recognition of God as God truly is.”

(Brueggemann, 427)

What Jacob learned – and what we learn as well – is that God loves him,

knows who he is, accepts him anyway,

and calls him to be engaged in the community

for the betterment of humankind.

Time Magazine published an issue that put forth the 100 most important people of the 20th Century. Yes, we could make a strong argument that no one is more important than anyone else. Having said that, we find amongst the top 100 leaders, revolutionaries, artists, entertainers, and people of international influence the remarkable story of one humble man’s wrestling with the holy at midnight while sitting at his kitchen table.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a man of extraordinary...courage whose belief in nonviolence never swerved.

From the time he assumed leadership of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott in 1955 to his murder 13 years later, he faced hundreds of death threats. His home in Montgomery was bombed, with his wife and young children inside. He was hounded by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, which bugged his telephone and hotel rooms, circulated salacious gossip about him

and even tried to force him into committing suicide after he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

As King told the story, the defining moment of his life came during the early days of the bus boycott. A threatening telephone call at midnight alarmed him: "N-----, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

Shaken, King went to the kitchen to pray. "I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'" (Time Magazine)

Face-to-face.

Adversity always changes our identity.

What needed to be changed in Jacob's life?

He needed to put aside his practices of deceit and sneakiness,

and instead take on a spirit of integrity.

He had character flaws that needed to be addressed, and they were.

Over time, over the course of a night, of a lifetime,

of the ebb and flow of relationships both personal and professional,

Jacob overcame his past tendencies and took on a new nature.

Consider his brash vow of self-preservation he made the night he first fled from Essau:

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,²¹ so that I come again to

my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." (Gen. 28: 20-22)

Now compare that brash vow

with what he said after wrestling with the divine

on the night before he was to meet Essau.

Jacob offered up a humble dedication to God and the community of faith:

"For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Gen. 32: 30)

This is a story of transformation.

This story touches our hearts and our imaginations and the depth of our being

because it is one of change, of growth, of moving from point A to point B,

of moving from where I am right now

to where God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ

are calling us to be and to become.

What is it in your life that you have struggled the most with?

What part of your character or behavior have you wrestled with overcoming or altering?

Have you given up trying to change that part of yourself that you like the least?

Who would you really like to be? To become? To grow into?

Can you name it and claim it?

What have you learned that can help someone else?

What have you gleaned through this struggle that can help someone else?

Jacob learned something, and told the whole world.

Be patient with the process of change – be patient with one another

– be patient with others going through the process of being transformed.

Extend grace and mercy

to those who wrestle with angels and demons,

with God and humans,

with fears and anxieties

and dreams and possibilities.

Ever feel like breaking old habits and making new ones is a wrestling match?

Remember that it takes, on average,

three months to break a habit and three to make and build a new one.

The longer you have behaved or acted, the longer it may take to change.

And that is okay.

So start now.

Start small, start smart, start with a friend, start with God,

start with a blessing, start with a sense of resolve and share your story,

which, naturally, brings in the accountability factor.

Changing behavior, changing how we act, is the start to changing habits.

When we change our behavior, we create new neurological pathways in our brains.

The power and presence of God is in your mind,

creating new pathways,

helping you to fire on all cylinders

and hold the course,

and making straight the ways through the wilderness of your mind.
(smile)

Face-to-face with Elohim, we struggle, and we prevail.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

(Extra Material)

A man found a cocoon of a butterfly.

One day a small opening appeared.

He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole.

Then it seemed to stop making any progress.

It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could, and it could go no further.

So the man decided to help the butterfly.

He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon.

The butterfly then emerged easily.

But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings.

The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time.

Neither happened!

In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings.

It never was able to fly.

What the man, in his kindness and haste did not understand,

was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required to get through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings.

It would then be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our lives.

If God allowed us to go through our lives without any obstacles, it would cripple us.

We would not be as strong as what we could have been.

We could never fly!

I asked for Strength.....and God gave me Difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for Wisdom.....and God gave me Problems to solve.

I asked for Prosperity.....and God gave me Brain and Brawn to work.

I asked for Courage.....and God gave me Danger to overcome.

I asked for Love.....and God gave me Troubled people to help.

I asked for Favors.....and God gave me Opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted.....I received everything I needed.

--

The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert
Senior Pastor
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
601 West Ponce de Leon Avenue
Decatur, Georgia 30030
[404-378-3621](tel:404-378-3621)

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." --Annie Dillard