

“Not Letting Go”

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Genesis 32:3-13, 23-30

The entire Old Testament – and, specifically, the bulk of Genesis – is the story of how God works in the world to fulfill the promise made to Abraham. God promised to bless him, and his descendants after him, so that – through them – the whole world would be blessed. Last week, we heard the story of birth of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, whose name means ‘laughter.’ That son grows up and marries a woman named Rebekah, who gives birth to twin boys: the first named Esau, the second named Jacob.

Though they are twins, the two boys couldn’t be any different. Esau is covered with red hair and grows up to be a big, burly man, a hunter, a meat-and-potatoes guy. Jacob is smooth skinned and liked to stay inside and cook.

My mom is here today, and while I was growing up with my two brothers, she loved us all and was very careful never to show any favoritism or bias: instead, she would describe me as her ‘favorite middle son.’ Unfortunately, Isaac and Rebekah did not follow this wisdom with their children; instead, they each showed a clear bias: Esau was dad’s favorite, and Jacob was mom’s preferred son.

In those days, the father of the household held all the property rights and a double portion of the inheritance would be passed down to the first-born son; this was called the birthright. One day, Esau was out doing manly things and Jacob was inside cooking stew; Esau came home and was hungry and so Jacob convinced his brother to trade his birthright for a bowl of soup. You could argue who was to blame here, but in any case, Jacob took what belonged to Esau.

When Isaac had grown old and blind, and knew he would soon die, he wanted to give his blessing to Esau, his favored son. Isaac told Esau to go out and hunt some game and fix a nice meal for him. While Esau was gone, Jacob – at his mother’s suggestion – again took advantage of the situation and tricked Isaac by putting goat hair on his arms and wearing Esau’s clothes so he would feel and smell like his bother. Isaac was duped and gave his blessing to the wrong son. When Esau got back, he was madder than mad; so, what did Jacob do? He ran for his life.

The story continues to show Jacob lying his way to get rich by tricking his father-in-law, Laban. Jacob is no longer welcome in that land, so – after twenty years on the run – God tells Jack to go back to the land God had promised to Abraham. In order to get there, he needs to cross the Jabbok River; and guess who is waiting for him on the other side?¹

Jacob gets word that Esau has come to the river with 400 fighting men; not a good sign. So, in today's first reading, we see Jacob prepare for the meeting; he divides his own traveling band into two companies – hoping that at least one of them would survive – and prepared a gift (or was it a bribe?) to try and appease his brother. Finally, Jacob sends everyone ahead so that he is left alone by the river as the darkness of night falls.

All of us have been in that place; alone with your thoughts, thinking back on what has taken place and wondering what lies ahead. After all of his cunning and all of his running, Jacob comes face-to-face with the realities of his actions and all their possible consequences. It's kind of like a wrestling match: coming to grips with what has happened in that particular time and place; and what your role in it all could have been or should have been. The author engages in some clever wordplay here as the name Jacob, the place Jabbok, and the verb for wrestling are all closely connected. You might surmise that he had been led there specifically to grapple with who he was and what it meant to have received – even if by ill-gotten means – his blessing.²

So, we are told, “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Was this a dream? Was it a metaphor of his fear about confronting Esau? Was his opponent a man or an angel or God? The identity is left a mystery, even after Jacob asked it to be revealed. Instead, we learn two other things about this encounter.

First, we hear that Jacob was weakened by the attack. Rather than revering to his usual tactics of lying, conniving, and then running away, Jacob decides to stand his ground and fight. He holds on tight all through the night; even though he may not be sure who his opponent is, he refuses to let go. This time, it is Jacob who is the recipient of the dirty trick, as the man touches his hip socket to try to weaken him; still, Jacob refuses to let go until he is given assurance of blessing. Jacob will walk away from this encounter wounded, with a limp, but not until he has received what he wants; or maybe needs.

¹ Steve Thomason, “What’s in a Name?”

² Amy Merrill Willis from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The second thing we learn about in this encounter is a new name. Jacob, after all, is a name that describes how he perceives himself: as a liar, a cheater, a grappler, a heel. But here, something amazing happens: the man looks at him and says, “no, you are Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with humans and have prevailed.” In other words, he is told, you are not the negative things that have defined you or controlled you. You are God’s child, and God will fulfill the promise in you and through you, now, go and face the truth.

Sometimes, we like to imagine that Jacob is the loser in this wrestling match. We assume that his many bad actions define him; and that if his opponent is really God, then surely someone like Jacob would not prevail. Jacob limps away from the scene of his struggle with God, and as a consummate liar, why should we believe that he has prevailed and seen God face to face?

After all, it may have all been a dream; Jacob alone with his thoughts in the middle of the night. But, if we were to look ahead to the next chapter, when Jacob finally does encounter his brother face-to-face – twenty years after deceiving his ailing father and stealing Esau’s blessing and rightful inheritance – God appears to him in the last place he would expect it: through the gracious acceptance of Esau who fully welcomes and forgives him.³

The true character of both Jacob and God are on display in this remarkable story. For God does not punish Jacob’s conflictive character, but confronts it and reshapes it so that Jacob is able to live into his promised destiny as Israel, which means “one who strives with God and humans.” All that he has been and has done could be redeemed and used for good. Jacob’s story is a much-needed reminder that in the life of faith there is no one model to which all of us must conform and submit. God can and will use all kinds of characters and personalities, even those that appear to be unconventional or irreverent by our standards.

It is only when we realize our own weaknesses and come to grips with who we really are that we can grow. We all struggle with something that weakens us, some way that we need help – whether it is some physical flaw, some scar from a past experience, or some manner in which our society or support system failed us. We all limp.

We do not know if Jacob’s hip injury was permanent, we are just told that when he left Jabbok he was still limping. We all carry injuries from our struggles with mysteries in our lives. Every loss of someone we love, every cancer diagnosis, every divorce leaves its mark. Just like Jacob, we will leave with a

³ John Holbert, “The Surprise of Grace”

limp. Sometimes, like Jacob, all we can do at the moment is hang on and not let go.

Sometimes, when we wrestle in the darkness, we might be angry with God; unable to understand how the world works or why we are the way we are. Remaining faithful throughout these times takes work and perseverance, holding on even when it would be easier to let go. Faith is not only a gift from God, the blessing is in the pursuit of God for us and us for God. We may not have all the answers, we cannot defeat or escape grief or heartache; they will leave a mark. So, we must be like Jacob and refuse to let go of God until some blessing comes which will let us see God's gracious and healing face.⁴

Of course, there are times when we do need to let go. Scholars debate how profoundly Jacob's character actually changed after wrestling and holding on through the night. But, if nothing else, his relationship with Esau did change: the twins who had always been rivals now arrived at a truce. After all the striving that had taken place against God and humans, the man now named Israel could use the blessing he received to be a blessing to others.

The good news is that God is always available to wrestle with us; at whatever level we are ready to struggle. When those times come when we examine who we are and what we are all about, God is not looking to pin us down, but to let us prevail; blessing us so that, at sunrise, we can walk away – even if with a limp – to encounter whatever might be in front of us.

And so, friends, hang on to God; don't let go; there is nothing unusual or wrong with our struggles. For we know that the light of day is coming. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

⁴ Beth Tanner from *WorkingPreacher.com*