

“Striving with God”
Genesis 32:22-32; Psalm 17:1-7, 15
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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“When I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness” Today’s psalm ends much as our snippet of Jacob’s story does. Jacob rises with the morning light satisfied that he has seen God’s likeness. It’s been a long night, though; we leave Jacob in a very different place than we found him.

When families from Richmond speak about meeting at the “riva,” they are planning a reunion unlike the one that Jacob was anticipating with Esau, his brother, as he waited by the river that day. *Theirs* would be a tense and awkward time, even violent; Jacob was afraid of it. Let’s take a moment to remember *why* – what had happened between these brothers . . . what led them to this moment in time.

They’d been at odds with each other, even from the start – even before they emerged from their mother’s womb. They were twins, and they struggled so *within* their mother that Rebekah wondered, “Is *this* how it’s going to be? If so, why live?” When she prayed about it, God told Rebekah that two nations were within her womb, and the two peoples born of her would be divided. One would be stronger than the other, and the elder would serve the younger. So it came to be. Esau was born first, and Jacob came out second, with his little hand gripping Esau’s heel. The two of them were always at odds. More often than not, Jacob was grasping at something that belonged to his brother, Esau.

And here is why Jacob left home: His father Isaac had grown old, nearly blind, and ready to die. But first he had to bless his eldest son, as was the custom then. This blessing – it would be more than a wish for Esau’s happiness. It would convey to Esau something of his father’s energy and vitality. It was a powerful thing, and once given it could not be taken back.¹ Isaac called for Esau – to give him the blessing, but *Jacob* went instead. With his mother’s help (!), Jacob disguised himself, so that Isaac (with that poor eyesight) could not tell Jacob from Esau. Jacob lied to his father, twice saying, “I am Esau, your eldest.” So Isaac was deceived, and he blessed Jacob. He gave to his youngest son the powerful promises of abundance and preeminence he had intended for Esau. When Esau realized that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he was distraught, then furious. He vowed to kill Jacob. So, again with his mother’s help, Jacob fled to Haran, to live with his Uncle Laban until it was safe for Jacob to return home.

But *was* it safe? Even now – some 15 years later, Jacob doesn’t know. He has wives and children now, and he’s concerned for their safety as much as his own. *How will Esau greet them?* As a peace offering of sorts, Jacob sends presents to Esau: oxen, donkeys, sheep and servants . . . they get to Esau ahead of Jacob. But the messengers

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, HarperOne, 1985, from his sermon “The Magnificent Defeat.”

who return to Jacob fail to say whether the gifts pleased Esau or not. What they say is that Esau is coming, and there are 400 men coming with him. It sounds like an army, doesn't it? When Jacob heard, he was terrified. He divided everything and everyone with him into two camps, thinking that if Esau attacked one company, the other might escape. Then Jacob prayed a foxhole prayer. He prayed for help and protection from Esau, whom he feared.

Jacob settled into one of the two camps for the night. At least, he tried to . . . but a powerful restlessness seized him and would not let him go. So Jacob got up that same night and moved everyone who was with him across the river – all his family, all he had – and he went back to the other side alone. Then he had one of the most mysterious encounters in all of scripture.

In his novel about Jacob, Frederick Buechner imagines the scene as it might have happened, and Jacob's thoughts as they might have rushed one to the next. Buechner imagines Jacob waiting for sleep to come . . . alone, anxious, trying to soothe himself with mundane memories of life in Haran. Then, *says Jacob*:

Someone leaped at me [– out of the dark – and with such force] that it knocked me onto my back. It was a man. I could not see his face. His naked shoulder was pressed so hard against my jaw I thought he would break it. His flesh was chill and wet as the river. He was the god of the river. My bulls [and flocks had defiled him. My children had fouled him.] He would not let me cross without a battle. I got my elbow into the pit of his throat and forced him off. I threw him over onto his back. His breath was hot in my face as I straddled him Quick as a serpent he twisted loose, and I was caught between his thighs He was not the god of the river. He was Esau. He had slain all my sons. He had forded the river to slay me. Just as my neck was about to snap, I butted my head upward with the last of my strength and caught him square Over and over we rolled together into the reeds at the water's edge. We struggled in each other's arms I knew that they were not Esau's arms. It was not Esau. I did not know who it was. I did not know who I was. I knew only my terror and that it was dark as death. I knew only that what the stranger wanted was my life For the rest of the night we battled in the reeds with the Jabbok roaring down through the gorge above us. Each time I thought I was lost, I escaped somehow. There were moments when we lay exhausted in each other's arms the way a man and a woman lie exhausted from passion. There were moments when I seemed to be prevailing . . . then he was at me with new fury For hours it went that way. I did not know why we were fighting. It was like fighting in a dream.²

Television journalist Bill Moyers once said that for him this story about Jacob was the most resonant story in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. He said so on a show where Moyers and various scholars had been talking about this story and the identity of the nighttime wrestler. So often, one of the scholars had said, *our fears take hold of us at night*. Things we can manage fairly well in the daytime come to haunt us when it's dark,

² Frederick Buechner, *The Son of Laughter*, HarperOne, 1994, pages 158-159.

and we're stretched out in bed feeling vulnerable. That's when all the questions come . . . the regrets . . . the longing . . . tears, even. We *wrestle* with mistakes we've made, pain we've caused other people, opportunities denied to us or to those we love, complicated choices, bad memories, dreaded conversations. At times like that, Moyers said, "I don't often know whether I'm struggling with God or with myself. And if I'm struggling with myself, I'm struggling with both the demonic and the divine in me."³ We struggle with our best and worst impulses at such times . . . we struggle with our hopes and our fears.

In the Bible story as we have it, Jacob seems to have wrestled with none other than God – God in a human form perfectly matched to Jacob's for a whole night of wrestling. And Jacob does seem to *hold on* to God as much as Jacob struggles to get free from God. The same might be said for God, too; God grabs on, but also strives to be free. Then finally, as the daytime approaches, God reaches down to touch Jacob firmly on the hip (as God might have done earlier, you'd think), and Jacob's hip is thrown out of joint.

What pain he must have felt! Still, Jacob clings to God; he will not let go 'til God blesses him. (From the start, we've seen that Jacob will do *anything* for a blessing!) He'll get that blessing. He will. But first God gives Jacob a new name. As the story goes, the name "Jacob" had come from the word for "heel," or "leg-puller." You could say that he was both; he was *born* that way, right? A deceiver, a supplanter, an over-reacher, a heel. That was Jacob. But God renames him "Israel." "Israel" means "the one who strives with God" *or* "God strives." Terence Fretheim suggests that the ambiguity of *that* name underlines God's commitment *to stay with Israel in the struggle*. They strive with one another, you see? That's what the new name *shows*. Even God's blessing comes to Israel in the midst of the striving they share. The odd combination of blessing and wounding in this story is what Frederick Buechner calls a Magnificent Defeat . . . what Walter Brueggemann calls a Crippling Victory. Either way, the blessing and striving are intertwined.

In his commentary on Genesis, Brueggemann turns from Jacob's encounter at Peniel to a resonant story about Jesus and his disciples.⁴ There, two of Christ's friends ask him for a favor: they want to sit at his right and left hand in heaven. They want thrones, Brueggemann says, but Jesus counters by asking them about cups and baptism and crosses. *Will they suffer as he is going to suffer* . . . drinking the cup he will drink, sharing his baptism, bearing the cross? There are no untroubled victories with this one. Christ invites his disciples to be people who prevail, but with a limp.

Remember our Call to Worship? Psalm 22 ends with the part we read today – a call to praise the God who hears people who cry and feeds people who are hungry . . . the God to whom the nations will bow down . . . the God who saves. But that psalm begins

³ Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Anchor, 1997, from the chapter on Wrestling with God, page 299.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Commentary, Westminster John Knox Press, page 266 and following.

with words Christ quoted as he was crucified. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That’s the worst of the nighttime questions, I think . . . the fear that we *are* as alone as we seem sometimes – the fear that God has left us. Not even Christ was spared the anguish of such questioning – the torment of a human struggle. He prevailed, but with wounds of his own.

The life of faith is marked by blessing; *it is . . . and* it is marked by striving, too – as we labor to understand what happens to us and around us . . . as we struggle to forgive, to speak the truth in love, to work for justice . . . as we strive to live responsibly and well, and to trust (as the psalmist says) “God saves” We pray sometimes as Jacob did, “Can you help me here?” Or as Jesus – “Thy will be done” . . . but later, “Where *are* you? Why have you left me?” Is it *God* with whom we struggle at such times, or ourselves? Some nights, I think, it is hard to tell.

But as Israel learned on the banks of the river, the God who “strives” is the same God who blesses. The nemesis of the night is the promise-keeper of the day, and divine blessings are knit, sometimes, to holy struggles. Be they crippling victories or magnificent defeats, they give us reason to stay in the fray, reason to keep striving and to continue hoping that one morning we will rise up as Jacob did – even as Jesus did – confident of God’s blessing and satisfied that we have seen God’s face.