

Genesis 32

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; ²and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called that place Mahanaim. ³Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; ⁵and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'" ⁶The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." ⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, ⁸thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

⁹And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹²Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

¹³So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ¹⁴two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove." ¹⁷He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' ¹⁸then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.'" ¹⁹He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, ²⁰and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." ²¹So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. ²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore 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.

Some of life's crucial turning points we recognize only in retrospect. Our difficulty in perception is one of the reasons we need the guidance of God.

One day my brother Kevin came to visit me when I was a freshman in college. We launched into conversation, and then the true nature of the visit revealed itself when he said, "I've been angry with you your entire life!" Stunned. I thought we were fairly good friends. He proceeded to tell me how I had stolen his birthright as the youngest child when I was born, not to mention that I was the only girl in a family with 5 boys. Not to mention that his birthday fell on December 8th and mine was Christmas Eve. Therefore, in his perception, my birthday was more special. He talked about how I got piano lessons, and he never got any kind of music lessons. He had to take me to baton lessons. On top of all that, because I was spoiled as the baby of the family and the only girl, I turned out to be a brat as a kid.

I was glad Kevin could tell me how he felt, and I began to do some reflective work. And I found a parallel with the Jacob-Esau story. Jacob stole Esau's birthright, too, and Esau was none too pleased.

This Old Testament reading tells of a crucial turning point in Jacob's life where he receives divine perspective of who has been, what he has done, and God's potential for his life, and God's intention to bless him. It is a story of one of the most famous human struggles with the divine—Jacob's encounter with God at the river Jabbok. Jacob was a man on the run. Family hostilities and dysfunction characterized Jacob's entire life. Because Isaac and Rebekkah played favorites, Jacob and his twin Esau grew up hating each other. From the day of his birth, he was a manipulator & trickster, grabbing and scrambling, figuring out how to outsmart and outmaneuver his brother Esau. Jacob cut a deal to swindle him out of his rightful inheritance. Later, he and Rebekkah lied and connived to steal the family blessing from his blind and dying father. This entitled Jacob to a double share of the family inheritance. When Esau threatens to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban. Jacob would meet his match with this devious future father-in-law. If the banking business had existed in his day which was actually forbidden by OT law, Jacob would have been collecting sweet executive bonuses.

But the day of reckoning was coming. After 20 years, Jacob is sick of Laban's manipulations, and is returning home. He soon hears that his brother Esau is on his way with an army of 400 men. Everything is at stake here. Jacob's family and future are on the line. This is Jacob's first encounter with Esau since Jacob snatched birthright and blessing from his brother. Life has a way of catching up with us. Jacob is afraid. Jacob expects Esau to be vindictive. Esau's army could easily crush Jacob's. And given what Jacob had done to him, Esau would have every right to do so. Our deepest crises and our greatest turning points often emerge from those moments.

With quick maneuvering he split his group up into two camps. Then he begged God to save him from his brother, and sent servants ahead to meet Esau with gifts of livestock. He concocted a bribe and sent a caravan of gifts along with his women and children across the river Jabbok. Jacob was willing to sacrifice his family and possessions in that crisis time. He sent them ahead of him and remains on the other side of Jabbok all alone. Perhaps that would pacify his brother's murderous threats?

Physically exhausted and anxious about Esau, alone in the desert wilderness, powerless to control his fate, with no worldly possessions, Jacob collapses into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River. Life has caved in. And it is under these circumstances that he meets God. He encounters a Messenger of God, and he wrestles with this visitor through the darkness of night. God does not come as some sweet presence. God comes as a mysterious adversary, to accost Jacob in a wrestling match. Fleeing his family history had been bad enough; wrestling with God was a different matter.

Whatever form their wrestling took, it was serious enough that the stranger crippled Jacob with a blow to his hip that disabled him with a limp for the rest of his life. Even after sustaining such a serious injury, Jacob does not give up. until the divine visitor says, *“Let me go, for the day is breaking.”* The visitor is insistent on leaving before the light of day. Maybe the angel choir of heaven was about to practice for worship and he didn’t want to be late, or maybe he was concerned about the risk of Jacob of seeing God face to face in the light of day.

At that Jacob says, *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”* Jacob tries to coerce a blessing from God. Instead, the visitor asks Jacob for his name. The name Jacob, means, 'grabs at the heel', 'trickster' and according to some scholars means cheater, manipulator, clever conniver. By saying his name he offers God access to the core of his character. **It is an act of confession.**

God replies by giving Jacob a new name. *“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”* Jacob tries one last grab -- to wrest the name from this stranger. Naming the other could be a way of controlling or domesticating the other. The stranger will have none of it. "Why do you ask my name?" he says. Jacob relents, but will grab one last thing: a blessing. The blessing begins as a new name. No longer "Grabber" (Jacob) but "Wrestler-with-God" (Israel). The blessing begins in a new identity. Grabber won't survive the night; Wrestler-with-God will. And then the final action: the last clause reports that God blessed Jacob.

Jacob names the place "Peniel"; "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." It was finally a fair fight. No taking advantage of a hungry brother or a blind father or outsmarting his father-in-law. Jacob persevered for he knew the value of blessing; he had cheated to get it from his father Isaac. But he wasn't going to be able to fake his way into getting *this* blessing. Unlike Isaac, God wasn't nearly blind. God could see into the deepest parts of Jacob's heart. Jacob finds a new perspective on himself, his purpose in life, his relationship with others, and peace to live with mysteries of God.

Jacob leaves the fords of Jabbok wounded and prepares to face his brother Esau. Jacob joins those who crossed the river ahead of him perhaps still afraid, *“Jacob walks bravely in front of his family, bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near his brother.”* Jacob humbled himself instead of running away. But instead of striking his brother, It is a scene of reconciliation, a scene of gracious welcome, and overwhelming relief. *“Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embrace him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Gen 33:3-4).”* It seems Esau does not bear grudges.

Jacob says to Esau: "*Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God*" (33:10).

We knew Jacob first as the deceiver who took his brother's blessing. Jacob, the shallow youth, becomes Israel, the father of a nation. The Israelites, have embedded in their very name that they are a people who strive—who wrestle—with God. As the church today, we have inherited, this role of wrestling with God as well. **To wrestle with God so that one can see God face-to-face requires the risk of losing the certainties of life.** When God wrestles with Jacob, it is costly, for Jacob is marked and wounded after it. We experience times when we feel as if we are wrestling with God. And many of us are marked by the wounds we have sustained from our struggles. **An encounter with God may mean we walk away limping .** Sometimes those injuries and scars are proud marks of making it through the struggle — of demanding the blessing at all costs.

Jacob does what all of us must do for integrity. He confronts in himself the things that are wounding him, admits his limitations, accepts his situation, rejoins the world, and moves on." The end result of the nocturnal struggle for this cheater and liar was God's blessing. This text reminds us that God is wrestling with us, and we grow in that process. The struggle is never devoid of divine presence and blessing. We may well struggle with through the night, but by daybreak God only intends to bless us.

In the words of the theologian Henri Nouwen, **Jacob, having wrestled with God, leaves Jabbok/Penuel as a “wounded healer,” not as a wounded wounder.** The hope is that he will learn from his injury and use his experience to heal, not to wound them out of his woundedness.

When we wrestle with God, God holds up a mirror that makes us face up to what we are. The mirror of God also invites us to discover our best self. Don't be afraid of the struggle. See the struggle as God giving you the chance to triumph over difficulty, to deepen, to grow, to forgive. Engage with the demons and with angels. Then release. Cross over the river and journey on. Give away your anger and there will be room in your soul to embrace love.

Blessing God, we have heard the story of Jacob as he wrestled with the angel, how he asked for the angel to bless him. We, too, come to you for blessing. There are so many times in our lives in which we have felt alone and dejected. It is easy for us to wallow in our misery, to whine about all the perceived injustices that have been heaped upon us. But you encourage us to stand strong; to seek the blessings that you have provided for us; to recognize the many ways that you are with us, giving us strength and courage. Be with us again, precious Lord. Guide our lives. As we have brought our prayers before you for those near and dear to us, seeking healing and hope for them; let us also remember that those same mercies are lavished upon us, not because we deserve them, but because of your great and generous love for us. Help us receive these blessings and, in turn, be a blessing to someone else. Amen.