

## **Genesis 32:22-31**

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

### **Summary of lessons from the story:**

- **We have to struggle to receive good things**

The story of Jacob wrestling with the man/angel/God is one that frames human existence as being about striving and struggle for what is good. Jacob struggles all night with the angel and receives a blessing. But the encounter through the night is so compelling that Jacob believes he has seen God face to face and prevailed. Peniel means the face of God.

What do you struggle with? What unresolved difficulties are part of your life?

What does the church struggle with? Keeping engaged in the struggle. Easy to give up and walk away.

Through persevering through the struggle that a blessing will be received.

Natalie Carnes

*The victory commended to us is to prevail, not by defeating God or God's messengers, but by meeting the divine face to face, with our own eyes—to refuse, like Jacob holding the angel, like the woman holding her gaze, to let go until we have received our blessing.*

If we stay the course, we receive a blessing.

- **Refusing easy answers: the battle involves confusion and risk**

The struggle isn't even necessarily resolved.  
Living with paradox and ambiguity.

The image of that intense struggle is indicative of our human condition. To fail to engage in that struggle has consequences for us. It means we cannot receive what is of ultimate value and worth: summarised as God's blessing.

Gauguin's painting of Jacob's battle, depicted on the front of the service sheet, focuses on the spectators. All the spectators in the picture, bar one, appear to have their eyes glazed over, they are unable to see, or don't want to see. They are blind to the epic struggle.

The temptation -which is reflected in Gauguin's image - is not to look - to disregard the challenge of life, and to be distracted by easy answers to complex problems.

It's like when Peter says to Jesus that he must not suffer, and Jesus responds, seemingly harshly – Get behind me Satan. For Jesus the temptation not to suffer and struggle with God is one that must be **firmly rejected**.

- **Not knowing everything: God is beyond us**

Within Judaism it is traditional still not to pronounce God's name as it is considered too holy. Terms like Adonai (Lord) and HaShem (the name) are used. There is a sense that when we name something, as Adam is invited to name all the creatures in the garden, then we gain control and superiority over what is being named. How then can we possibly know or speak God's name?

Where in our lives do we seek to know as God knows? What dangers are there in that?

- **The necessity of defeat**

Rainer Maria Rilke

**What we triumph over is small  
And the success itself makes us petty  
The eternal and unexampled  
Will not be bent by us.**

Is it any wonder that so much of the talk in the New Testament is about learning to see – a necessity if we are to accept life in all its fullness. We are blessed that in having eyes to see, life becomes ever richer, more complex, paradoxical, frustrating, challenging,

mysterious. Surely, we don't want a God we can defeat? We don't want to be in ultimate control?

God's otherness is total – and yet, in this story Jacob meets God face to face, and indeed he is renamed through the encounter. It is in that meeting with God that he is transformed – he changes from Jacob to Israel. As part of that transformation, Jacob suffers a wound. His hip is hit and becomes out of joint and subsequently he has a limp. He does not leave the encounter unscathed.

- **The importance of wounds**

French philosopher, Jean-Louis Chretien writes about this story:

There are wounds one must not heal  
For they are the source of our loving intimacy  
With our highest task  
The one we have received impossibly  
Without having sought it.

There are parallels in other Bible passages that evoke the importance of wounds, disability, weakness. St Paul, for instance, talks about the thorn in the flesh that God won't remove from him.

Therefore, so that I would not become arrogant, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to trouble me—so that I would not become arrogant. I asked the Lord three times about this, that it would depart from me. But he said to me, “My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Our limitations, struggles, disabilities, aren't barriers to our serving God, quite the opposite, often they are what enable us to encounter God. Power made perfect in weakness.

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Thank goodness that God is beyond us and before us, that they are elusive and mysterious; that they will not be bent to human will, but that they will encounter us – challenging us, reforming us, enabling us.

As we look again with the spectators of the battle between Jacob and the elusive other figure, we are invited to consider the intense battles of our own spiritual lives.

To summarise:

- **We have to struggle to receive good things**
- **Refusing easy answers: the battle involves confusion and risk**
- **Not knowing everything: God is beyond us**
- **The necessity of defeat**
- **The importance of wounds**