

WRESTLING WITH GOD

TEXT: Genesis 32:22-31

The last couple of Sundays we have seen Jacob con, cheat, deceive and manipulate virtually every member of his family and then run off when the tension was about to explode into full conflict. The fact that Jacob seems to get away with this bad behavior and also garner promises, wives, children and household goods in the process only increases our ambivalence about this ancestor of Israel.

Today we meet up with Jacob as he has fled Haran with his entourage of two wives, two concubines, ten sons, one daughter and his motley-colored flock of sheep. More importantly, he is heading to meet up with his twin brother Esau after twenty years. Esau wanted to kill Jacob when he fled from his home in Canaan, and for all Jacob knows, he still wants to do so. In fact, Jacob has just heard that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men! It does not sound like the makings of a happy reunion, and Jacob is terrified.

This does not bode well for a happy reunion. Sitting, as it were, between a rock and hard place, Jacob hides away half of his wealth, and then, with what is left, he sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau, intending to bribe his way back into his brother's good graces.

So then Jacob, fearful that all his plans and schemes will come to naught, sends the rest of his servants and his family across the river, hoping, perhaps, that even if Esau refuses his tribute he may, at least, take pity on Jacob at the sight of his defenseless wives and children.

So Jacob waits by the River Jabbok, dreading his encounter with Esau. And then it happens...pacing by the dark and troubled river and accompanied only by his own frustrated schemes and feeble contingencies, Jacob is attacked by what can only seem like a demon. All night long the two wrestle, until, as daylight approaches and Jacob

seems on the verge of prevailing, his opponent dislocates his hip and demands release. “Bless me, first” Jacob cries, perceiving that, whether demon or angel, this is no ordinary creature. To which his adversary, soon to be revealed as God, responds, “Tell me your name.”

I believe that it is important at this point to understand the significance that names held in the near-Eastern cultures from which our Bible comes. For far from merely identifying a person, names in Jacob’s culture reveal one’s essential character and sometimes their destiny. And so to know a person’s name is to have a certain power over that person, for no matter what he or she says or does, you can reply, “Hey! – You can’t get away with that: I *know* you.”

Now, Jacob’s name means the usurper, the supplanter, or, more loosely, the cheat, for he is the one who came from his mother’s womb already grabbing his brother’s heel. And how appropriate a name it is, for all of his life Jacob has devoted his energy and wit to usurping what rightfully belongs to others. That is, Jacob at heart is nothing more than a fraud, a common trickster, charlatan, and scoundrel. And deep down, you see, Jacob knows this. And so when the wrestler pins Jacob down and demands to know his name, he is demanding no less than that Jacob confess – confess his ill-gotten gains and shoddy character, confess his misused talents and wasted life. And to do this, to come clean, is for one such as Jacob nothing less than death, for when the con man and phony is revealed for what he is, what has he left?

Viewed this way, we can hardly refrain from rejoicing at this scene, for at long last Jacob is about to receive his proper comeuppance, to be put in his place once and for all and finally get what he deserves.

Except. Except that in the face of Jacob’s confession of his name, the Lord – far from doling out the punishment Jacob both certainly merits and probably expects – the Lord gives Jacob a new name. He calls him Israel, the one who has wrestled with God and with man and has prevailed.

Frederick Buechner tells the story as Jacob might have described it:
“He outweighed me, he out-wrestled me, but he did not overpower me. He did not overpower me until the moment came to overpower me. When that moment came, I knew that he could have made it come whenever he wanted. I knew that all through the night he had been waiting for that moment. He had his knee under my hip. The rest of his weight was on top of my hip. Then the moment came, and he gave a fierce downward thrust. I felt a fierce pain. It was less a pain I felt than a pain I saw. I saw it as light. I saw the pain as a dazzling bird-shape of light. The pain’s beak impaled me with light. It blinded me with the light of its wings. I knew I was crippled and done for. I could do nothing but cling now. I clung for dear life. I clung for dear death. My arms trussed him. My legs locked him. For the first time he spoke.

He said, “Let me go.” The words were more breath than sound. They scalded my neck where his mouth was touching. He said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” Only then did I see it, the first faint shudder of light behind the farthest hills. I said, “I will not let you go”. I would not let him go for fear that the day would take him as the dark had given him. It was my life I clung to. My enemy was my life. My life was my enemy.

I said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Even if his blessing meant death, I wanted it more than life. “Bless me,” I said. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” He said, “Who are you?” There was mud in my eyes, my ears and nostrils, my hair. My name tasted of mud when I spoke it. “Jacob,” I said. “My name is Jacob.”

“It is Jacob no longer,” he said. “Now you are Israel. You have wrestled with God and with men. You have prevailed. This is the meaning of the name Israel.” I was no longer Jacob. I was no longer myself. Israel was who I was. The stranger had said it. I tried to say it the way he said it. *Yees-rah-ail*. I tried to say the new name I was to the new self I was. I could not see him. He was too close to me to see. I could see only the curve of his shoulders above me. I saw the first glimmer of dawn on his shoulders like a wound.

I said, “What is your name?” I could only whisper it. “Why do you ask me my name?” We were both whispering. He did not wait for my answer. He blessed me as I had asked him. I do not remember the words of his blessing or even if there were words. I remember the blessing of his arms holding me and the blessing of his arms letting me go. I remember as blessing the black shape of him against the rose-colored sky. I remember as blessing the one glimpse I had of his face. It was more terrible than the face of dark, or of pain, or of terror. It was the face of light. No words can tell of it. Silence cannot tell of it. Sometimes I cannot believe that I saw it and lived but that I only dreamed I saw it. Sometimes I believe I saw it and that I only dream I live.”

And so the scene concludes with Jacob limping away from this contest not defeated but victorious, carrying a new name and character and living life as a new person. For not only will Jacob and Esau be reconciled in the chapters to come, but Jacob will also sire a nation from his twelve sons and they and their descendants proudly bear his name even to this day.

The character of Jacob and the character of God are both remarkably displayed in this passage. God does not punish Jacob’s conflictive character, but challenges it and reshapes it so that Jacob is able to live into his promised destiny as Israel, which, according to the text, means “one who strives with God and humans”. Jacob’s story is a much-needed reminder that in the life of faith, there is no one model to which we must conform and submit. God entertains all kinds of characters and personalities, even those who appear to be unconventional or irreverent by our standards.

So I ask each of us today about our own personal wrestling matches with God. When and how have you faced God and found yourself wrestling with what God has called you to be? When God has asked you to tell God your name, how have you answered? How would you confess your name? Silently, or jotting down on your bulletin, take a minute to answer this question: Who are you? Really. What is your name? What is it that others call you? More importantly, what is it that you call yourself? What is that name you can scarce speak for fear or shame? Scoundrel, cheat,

or phony like Jacob? Unworthy, irresponsible, unfaithful? Discouraged or burnt-out? Divorced, deserted, or widowed? Coward or bully? Unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Abused or abuser? Ugly or abnormal? Admitting the power of these names over us implies a significant amount of vulnerability. But I think that only as we confess the names we wear and bear can we hear God's unrelenting response: "No! No! You are Christ! To me you are Christ! You are my beloved, the one I chose and redeemed at great cost, the one to whom I am committed and to whom I promise to protect and care for all the days of your life. For you are my child. You are Christ!"

As we all know, names can limit us, hurt us, even kill. But so also can they heal and make alive. Today's lesson once again reminds us of our true name and new identity so that we may go out into the world as new persons, as God's own beloved children. Amen.