

Sunday, August 2, 2020
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13 (Year A)

Genesis 32.22-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/665190457415670>

(Sermon begins at about 13:30)

“Struggling with God”

For many years, Jacob has been hiding away from his brother Esau. As you recall, Jacob swindled his older brother out of his birthright. And then, to add insult to injury, Jacob conned their father Isaac into giving him the blessing that is reserved for the eldest son. As a result, Esau was furious and vowed to kill his brother. To protect her son, Rebekah sent Jacob to live with her brother Laban in Haran. Over twenty years later, Jacob now has two wives, eleven children by four different women, and vast wealth consisting of cattle, oxen, donkeys, goats, sheep, camels, and slaves. Now, Jacob wants to return to his homeland with his family. He sends messengers to Esau seeking reconciliation. As we pick up the story, Jacob has just sent his servants with gifts to appease Esau. Jacob sends his family on, hoping they will be safe, while he waits for the arrival of his brother, and for what may be a final reckoning. Now alone, Jacob has an encounter which will forever change the trajectory of his life and the lives of his progeny.

As we are told, that night “a man wrestled with [Jacob] until daybreak” (Gen 32.24b). Looking at the elements of the story, it is admittedly a little confusing as to just who Jacob was wrestling and why. We are initially told it was a man and that he “did not prevail against Jacob.” In fact, Jacob seems to have the upper hand, not releasing the man until he receives a blessing from him. But then, just a few verses later, the man declares, “You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (Gen 32.28). Usually, it is only God, or God’s messenger that conveys a name change. And whoever this is tells Jacob his name is being changed because he has “striven with God.” So, was the struggle with God? Was it with an angel? Was it with a mortal man? It’s all very confusing. As my Study Bible notes: “Because of its enigmatic and ambiguous elements, the story has inspired an array of interpretations about human nature, divine presence, and the meaning of struggle. These interpretations include reading the story as a battle with a river demon, as a contest with the enemy (Esau or his guardian angel), as an initiation or rite of passage, as a test of fitness for future responsibilities, as an inner struggle that leads to a transformed self, and as a direct encounter with God.”¹ Without adequate information, you could propose all sorts of interpretations of the nature of the struggle: be it a real physical struggle, a psychological struggle, or a spiritual struggle.

We will never know exactly what was behind Jacob’s struggle. As to who he was struggling with, let’s take it at face-value. We are first told that Jacob wrestled with a man. And then he is given a new name because he has “striven with God.” So, let’s assume that God took the form of a man for purposes of wrestling with Jacob. Hey, when you’re God, you can do anything you want. The important thing is not so much the form that God took during this wrestling match, or even the reason for the struggle. The important thing is that it happened. The important

thing is that it says something about our God and his relationship with his people. That God is not some all-powerful deity up there somewhere out of reach and inaccessible. Okay, he is an all-powerful deity, I'll grant you that. But despite being all-powerful, he is willing to engage his people. And even to struggle with his people, if that's where someone is in their own life. When struggling with God, it is because our human desires run counter to what God is asking. Hence the struggle. And it is telling that our God does not just make us do what he wants, but allows us to talk back, to fight back, in hopes of changing God's mind and getting our own way. Yeah, good luck with that one. But God is willing to engage in the struggle, nonetheless. Because the struggle itself can be transformative. Jacob, now Israel, came away physically changed—he was maimed and ended up with a limp. But the physical change was merely indicative of a deeper, more fundamental change in who he is.

Such struggles generally center around discerning what God is calling a person to do or be. This can be very much like a wrestling match. God wants one thing and the person has other ideas. Or just plain doesn't want to hear what God has to say. And so, the struggle ensues. Kind of like the match described in Genesis. The fact that Jacob and God, in the guise of a man, wrestled all night indicates that neither one was able to fully prevail and win the match. Likely, as such things go, one party would have the advantage for a brief time, only to be overtaken by the other. With the result being a back and forth.

The fact that the struggling only lasted one night is, I think, amazing. More often than not, struggling with God can go on for an extended period of time, depending on how resistant, or how stubborn, the individual is to hearing what God has to say. Or rather, to giving in to what God is asking. I speak from experience. I have struggled with God myself on various occasions. Probably the longest is what I characterize as my 20-year argument with God over whether I should go into the priesthood. God would tap me on the shoulder. I would either ignore it or argue, depending on my mood. God would eventually get the message and leave me alone. For a little while. But he would always come back. More persistent than ever. Over time, the encounters, the struggles, became more frequent and more intense. Until, obviously, God won. No. Until I came to realize that I was indeed meant to be a priest. I know it's splitting hairs, but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of thinking he won.

The interesting thing is that the account of Jacob's wrestling with God seems to imply that Jacob had the upper hand. After wrestling all night, Jacob's opponent wants to be let go. But Jacob will not comply until he receives a blessing. Not an uncommon request when engaged in a struggle with another, be they divine or mortal; to ask for a blessing from one's opponent as a sign of good-will and that there are no hard feelings. One could construe this to be a draw, although Jacob does appear to be in the slightly better position—ever so slightly. But then the opponent says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Changing Jacob's name implies an authority, perhaps a right that has been won, which in turn implies that the opponent, that God, has prevailed. In the Bible, when someone's name is changed, it represents a new identity, a new relationship with God, and a new role to be played in the kingdom of God. And God would have ultimately had to have been the winner for that to happen.

Here, the changing of name implies a whole new way of life for Jacob, now Israel. Jacob's original name meant "to grasp the heel of." Appropriate since Jacob was born just seconds after Esau, and literally came out of the womb holding onto his brother's foot. Jacob also means "supplanter" or "one who replaces another." Again, appropriate, as later in life Jacob is focused on getting what should rightly go to the eldest son, to Esau—his inheritance and the blessing of their father. So, throughout his life, Jacob has lived into the meaning of his name by conniving, cheating, and deceiving. And now he is given a new name. Israel, which most likely means "he who struggles with God." "This new name commemorates Jacob engaging directly with God. But the blessing Israel receives begins a change in him. Over time, he lets go of his need to gain for himself and instead acknowledges the Lordship of God over his life, taking on the stature of patriarch."² So, while not readily apparent from the account presented, God actually wins. As the remainder of the story of the patriarchs tells us, Jacob, now Israel, becomes, or rather lives into, his role as the founder of the nation, or at least the confederation of twelve tribes, that bears his name. Living into the destiny that was first promised to his grandfather Abraham, then passed down to his father Isaac, and now it is Israel's turn to take up the mantle and fulfill the next part of God's plan.

The story of Jacob wrestling with God is a model for our own relationships with God. Just as in our relationships with other people, we may not always agree with them. We do not always want to go along with what they might want. But part of being in relationship is struggling through those differences in perspective. If we are open to honest self-reflection, those times of struggle can give us greater insight into ourselves. The struggle itself can be transformative, as we discover more about ourselves and more about our relationship with the other. Opening the way to new paths that we might not have even considered. Or maybe considered but initially rejected. As we work through struggles in our relationships, we generally come out the better because of the struggles, because we have done the hard work of getting to the core values of our relationship and what that means to us and for us. If it is truly a good and healthy and loving relationship, we are transformed for the better. We come through the struggles stronger. Stronger as an individual, but also the relationship is stronger.

This also applies to our relationship with God. That it is okay to struggle with God. Because ultimately, the struggle provides us with valuable lessons about ourselves. The struggle helps us to learn more about God. The struggle helps us to develop a deeper and more abiding relationship with God. In fact, it is often through struggles that God does some of his best work on us. It is often through the difficulties of struggling with God that we are transformed in far more meaningful and significant ways than would have occurred otherwise. We may not always be transformed in the midst of the struggle, but certainly will be transformed because of it. Just as Jacob was transformed to Israel, which began a whole process of transformation, not only for himself but for his family. A process of transformation that would ultimately change the world.

Our own struggles with God may not transform the world in any earth-shattering way, but they will result in transformation, nonetheless. And then again, Jacob would have had no reason to think his own struggle would be anything earth-shattering, but look what happened.

If anything, struggles with God are not something to be avoided. Because they are a way of growing as human beings and growing in our relationship with God. Now, I don't necessarily suggest going out and picking a fight with God. But if God does seek to engage you in a wrestling match, go for it. It is through such struggles that we are transformed, bringing us one step closer to just who God created us and calls us to be. And just as God blessed Jacob at the end of their struggle, so too will we be blessed in our own struggles with God. Even if God does always win.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 59.

² Heather Adams, "What's in a Name? 4 Times God Changed a Person's Name," Bible Study Tools, July 29, 2019. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/whats-in-a-name-5-times-god-changed-a-person-s-name.html>.