

MET HIS MATCH
Genesis 32:22-31
(sermon idea from “Sore Losers,” Homiletics,
July/August 2005; Frederick Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat; Walter Brueggemann,
Genesis Interpretation Commentary)

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I was once sitting in the Amarillo airport, about to board an afternoon plane for Dallas. As the jet arrived, bringing the passengers who had to deplane before we could board, I noticed that these were not your usual Panhandle personalities getting off the plane.

There was an enormous man of Herculean proportions – bulging biceps, powerful pecs. He caught my attention because he was not built in the ordinary proportions of a man. One by one, men with gladiatorial gusto walked off the plane. Huge men. Tall men. Brawny. Flamboyant. Bleached blond hair. Dark, tanned skin. And they were followed by an entourage of women. We were all puzzled until somebody knew who they were and what they were doing. They had come to Amarillo to wrestle in the upcoming wrestling matches – these modern day dramatic portrayals of good versus evil.

The closest I ever came to wrestling fame was about a year ago when I preached Ronnie Mankin’s funeral and Terry Funk sat over here on the front pew.

Wrestling tends to be a man’s sport, although every now and then someone will declare how their grandmother was glued to the television every Saturday night for ten years while she watched her favorite fighter, Hulk Hogan, back in the day.

Who would you want to wrestle? Would you want to go up against Nature Boy? The Ultimate Warrior? The Undertaker? Sycho Sid? Ricky Steamboat? King Kong Bundy? The Avenger? All these have been the names of actual wrestlers. But there was the name of one wrestler I came across that caught my attention. His name? Masked Confusion.

When I saw his name, I knew that while I had never seen him wrestle, I had read about one of his matches before – this unknown warrior of the ring who brings as much confusion as he does clarity to the situation. We have his first match recorded all the way back in The Torah, in the Book of Genesis, chapter 32. Of all the stories about the Patriarchs – the Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph stories – one Old Testament scholar says there is no story that is more extensively interpreted than this story, possibly because it lacks clarity. The meaning is hard to discover.

We come to a difficult story today because we come to a match against the man of masked confusion.

You remember the Jacob story. He was one of the twins of Isaac. Abraham and Sarah had waited for a boy forever, and finally, at an ancient age, God gave them Isaac, the son of laughter. They laughed because they were too old to have a baby. Isaac finds a bride, Rebekah. And now the promise to Abraham to be a great nation moves from Abraham to Isaac. And Isaac must finally give it to one of his boys – the oldest, Esau, or the younger, Jacob. Jacob steals the blessing by deceiving his father and pretending that he is Esau. He puts on Esau’s garb. He glues goat hair to his skin so he will feel like Esau. In the end, he smells like Esau, and through the savory dish, he tastes like Esau. Then in chapter 27 Isaac gives him the blessing. “You will be master of your brothers. Your mother’s sons will bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you.”

Esau is furious. He comes in, seeking his father’s blessing. There is no blessing to be had, for Jacob had stolen it and fled. Jacob’s name means “heel-grabber” or “deceiver” Remember, they were twin boys, and even in the womb Jacob was grabbing the heel of Esau. Rebekah, who always loved Jacob the most, sent him away to live with Laban, her brother – his uncle. And he’s gone for double decades. Esau bears a grudge and declares, “I will kill you.”

Now, by chapter 32, Jacob – 20 years later, fearful of Esau, trembling with terror – makes his way back to the Promised Land, leaving his uncle Laban. He’s been prosperous all these years and now he comes back with all of his herds and his family, his wives and his children, to enter the Promised Land as the chosen son of Isaac.

When he is alone, having sent his family ahead, he wrestles with God.

It’s an interesting story, and it’s hard to know what to make of it. He wins, and yet he loses. He prevails, and yet he limps. Frederick Buechner has called this wrestling match the “magnificent defeat.” It is a defeat because he limps. It is magnificent because he wins, so to speak. You might call it the “crippling victory.” It carries the same meaning. This is not four three-minute rounds. This is an all-night match with masked confusion.

I say masked confusion because as we read the story we end up with as many questions as we do answers.

- Who was the mysterious assailant, this masked man?
- Why was he fighting Jacob?
- Why was he unable to defeat him?
- Why did he appear afraid about being overtaken by daylight?
- Why did he strike Jacob’s thigh?
- Why wouldn’t he reveal his name to Jacob?

We’re going to address these issues. Pull up a chair. Take a ring side seat and get ready to rumble – the wrestling match with God.

The text calls the unexpected opponent a man, but we know better, for he has the power to give the very blessing of God. And he fears daylight which will reveal his true identity. I’m sure that he is God (or at least God’s representative), for when Jacob had finished the match he declared, “I have seen God face to face.” It hardly seems a fair contest between mortal and immortal, between God and man, with God, Yahweh, being the heavyweight champion of the universe.

In this strange story, God seems to limit his power enough to give Jacob a fighting chance, at least for a while. And Jacob, the rascal, the deceiver, the heel-grabber, wiry as he is, seems to hold his own. As dawn is about to break, as the sun is starting to shine, the mysterious adversary, this masked man, knocks Jacob's hip out of joint with one crushing blow, and insists that Jacob let him go. But Jacob refuses, holding on. For Jacob, the man who always wants a blessing, grabs until God will give him a new name. And he becomes "Israel" – the one who strives with God. And even in receiving the blessing, he limps away "Israel," having arrived "Jacob,"

Yet, the mysterious opponent refused to reveal to Jacob his own name, for no one should control God by calling his name upon command. Jacob never gets all that he seeks from God, although he gets all that he ever needs. He received yet another blessing, but he did not get God's name. He could not rip off the mask of his opponent.

Jacob wants to know God's name, the mystery of heaven and earth. Like the couple in the garden (Genesis 2-3), Jacob wants to overcome all the distance between himself and God. The stranger did not win, but he did not lose either. So, he will not grant as much as Jacob asks. Jacob has gained a great deal, but the name of God has not yet been revealed. We have to wait for Moses (Exodus 3:14) for that. No longer merely "Jacob," the deceiver; but now "Israel," the one who strives alongside God.

You may think this is an odd story, but "God as adversary" is a theme all too prominent in the Old Testament for us to ignore this morning. In Exodus 4, a strange passage, Moses is doing exactly what God has asked him to do. Yet, on the way, "the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him" (Exodus 4:24).

In Numbers 22, God sends an angel with drawn sword against Balaam, the soothsayer. And Balaam is saved by his talking donkey.

In the book of Job, God gives Satan permission to attack the righteous Job, taking from him his family and his goods and afflicting him with sores.

In the New Testament book of James, the brother of Jesus says when you face trials of any kind – in other words, when you come to a wrestling match with God – consider it nothing but joy.

In these stories, God is not attacking someone coming against him. He is not going against his enemies. Rather, in these strange Old Testament stories God attacks people who are actually seeking to do his will – at least people playing a crucial role in the divine covenant. God sometimes takes action against those who are his friends, not his enemies. A tough-love component to God's compassion. And the Lord, indeed, does seem to reprove the one that he loves.

Vince Lombardi enjoyed a long reign with the Green Bay Packers. Sports writers noted that one particular player seemed most often the object of Lombardi's anger. A Green Bay pastor had a team member in his congregation and asked him if the sports writers were right about Coach Lombardi's anger toward the one player. "Definitely," said the player-parishioner. "He's Coach Lombardi's favorite."

God sometimes wrestles with his favorites. And Jacob, to be sure, was the chosen bearer of his covenant.

Whatever else this passage is about, it is about the wrestling match. Every ancient Jewish interpreter concluded at least that much. And by the time of Jerome on, the wrestling match represented something of a prayer battle, long and earnest. To be sure, there is a real wrestling match – dust flying, bodies bending – but it all represents meeting with God. And the resulting limp is a result of the power exchanged between God and humanity. Sometimes God must cripple those among us like Jacob, who are self-sufficient believers, in order to bless us.

The story might seem strange until I put it to you another way. Who among you has not spent a night wrestling with God?

Here is a man who feels called into ministry, but ministry is not what he wants to do. And he says “no.” And God says “yes.” And he says “no.” And God says “yes.” And all night they wrestle, into the wee hours of the morning until, finally, in this confrontational meeting, the man yields himself to the call of God.

You know, there are blessings that only God can give. One interpreter of this passage said, “Power, success and happiness – the world can give those to anybody who will work hard enough for them. But peace, love and joy are only from God.”

God changes Jacob’s perspective. The deceiver is now the one who rules, who reigns, who wrestles with God – alongside of God. You cannot wrestle with God and not walk away differently, and Jacob does. He limps. Jacob thinks he has gotten what he wanted from God. But in reality, God got what he wanted from Jacob. No struggle with God is pleasant. And it usually does happen in the wee hours of the night – wrestling all night long, waiting for the sun to rise when the opponent will have to leave. Weary of mind, tired of body, but we awake with new possibilities over the horizon. For we, too, become the bearers of a new name. We are the sons and daughters of God.

We wrestle with God when we want to do things “our way” instead of his way. We wrestle with God when we, like Jacob, are grabbers of the heel, deceivers – trying to grab and get all that we can rather than be obedient to the will and the way of God.

God can and does ask us to do things that take us out of our comfort zone, that challenge us, that even change who we are from head to toe. And when He does, we wrestle – sometimes, like Jacob, all night long.

Jacob is changed by a new limp. This is no minor injury. Rather, he is wounded by his wrestling with God. Wrestling with God on this occasion did not end simply with healing, but it resulted in crippling – a mark of the new Israel. The new name, “Israel” – a pleasant twist and change, cannot be separated from the new crippling. Having penetrated the mystery of God in the night like none before him, Jacob arises a crippled man. He has prevailed with the blessing, but his prevailing is a defeat as well as a victory.

There are no untroubled victories with the Holy One. When Jacob declares in Genesis 28:16 that “God is in this place,” it is both a cause for dread as well as a cause for rejoicing. The limp affirms that only God is God, and Jacob is now a cripple with a blessing. And Israel, as a people, must now ponder that the blessings of God are given at a great cost. Weakness is found in power, and

power is found in weakness. In the New Testament, the gospel – the greatest Good News of all – finds its limp in the cross, and we have a crucified Messiah.

Like Jacob wanting blessings and the name of the Divine in order to control Him, the disciples want thrones and power. And Jesus counters by asking them about cups and baptisms and crosses. Like Jacob, they are invited to be persons of faith who prevail, but to do so they are going to have to limp. And because Jacob sees God, he lives in a new way. And this new way involves a limp.

God will not be taken lightly or easily by Jacob. Or by me. Or by you. And in the cross of Christ Jesus we see there are no cheap reconciliations. Jacob is on his way to reconcile himself to his brother, Esau. But in the night he finds himself reconciled to God. And resultantly, he is reconciled to his brother. Love of God and love of brother belong together – always have, always will.

In Genesis 32:20, Jacob says he is going to appease Esau with the presents of animals. He says of him, “After this, I will see his face.” In verse 30 of Chapter 32, after wrestling with God, Jacob calls the place Peniel “because I have seen God face to face.” He’s going to see Esau’s face, but before he can see Esau’s face, he sees God face to face. And then finally, do you see what happens? In Chapter 33:10, after having reconciled with Esau, he says, “No, please, now if I’ve found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand for I see your face as one sees the face of God and you have received me favorably.” Going to see the face of Esau, he instead wrestles and sees God face to face; and now seeing the face of Esau is like seeing the face of God.

Look back at Genesis 33:4. “Then Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

Reconciled to God firstly, and only then, can be reconciled to brother.

Some of you here this morning have been wrestling with God. You, too, have met the masked man in the middle of the night and tossed to and fro. You, too, if you’re obedient will emerge with a new name– the son or the daughter of God – and with a new walk, maybe even a limp.