

On the mat. A sermon preached as part of a summer series on the story of Jacob, August 21, 2016 within St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: GENESIS 32:22-32

II CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

It is a portion of the Jacob story that pulsates with energy.

There is nothing passive here.

Jacob is alone on the shores of the Jabbok River – it is night.

He can see the campfires across the river.

It is still.

Jacob's family has crossed over to the other side.

Perhaps it is the first time in years that he has been alone.

But his mind is certainly not relaxed – the confrontation with Brother Esau is to happen in the morning

The night before a stressful time – can we not put ourselves in the emotional state Jacob must be in?

Night before a big event in our lives

A time when we face our worst fears and our deepest wishes

What will tomorrow bring

The news of his messenger's about Esau coming with 400 men is not what Jacob wants to hear

Not unexpected though, given the memories Jacob has of Esau's promise of payback 20 years before – years wracked by guilt for his treatment of Esau

I wonder if that gives rise to other thoughts

--his blind father's embrace

--the amazing dream of the ladder by the side of the road at Bethel

--his unhappy surprise on his wedding night when it is Leah who is in his bed, not his promised Rachel

--14 years with Uncle Laban and he has not left that situation on terribly positive terms

In the stillness and dark of night, Jacob wonders...

Without warning or introduction a wrestling match begins

This ominous encounter with an unnamed opponent possessing divine qualities.

The opponent's identity is obscure.

The writer does not want us to know too much –

In the middle of the night, the two forms merge and overlap.

Part of the power of the scene is that we do not know the name or see the face of the antagonist.

Is it God?

An angel

Jacob wrestling with himself

Esau

Or Esau's angel – like some prelude to their match on the morrow

Text Elda read gives us a bewildering variety of signals, as it calls the wrestler a man,
 Yet he is the one who bestows blessing
 Almost vampire like he flees at the break of day
 He refuses to reveal his name to Jacob and to us
 His parting blessing though includes the news that
 Jacob has wrestled with both man and God
 And Jacob has a new name – Israel. – something of
 the blessing and power of God has been entrusted
 to the man up to this point we have known only as
 Jacob, the trickster.

This is no ordinary story – it really has no parallel
 anywhere else in scripture.

And yet, and yet, and yet
 Without subtracting in any way from the
 uniqueness and mysterious otherness of this story
 on the banks of the Jabbok,
 I believe this story has touch points to our lives.
Night work – while I am not suggesting that people
 of faith wrestle at night with mysterious figures on
 riverbanks,
*There are going to be times when we are going to have to
 do 'night work'*
*And doing this night work will leave us feeling
 particularly vulnerable.*

For I believe that in the stillness and quiet of night,
 often our fears, our worries, our anxieties, our
 apprehensions of the coming day or the past day

often become the dominant or default position in our minds – yes?

And let me say here, this has nothing to do with the depth of our faith in the Risen Lord.

It is more a reflection that indeed 'life is difficult'.

The things we were able to push aside or not allow ourselves to think about tend to surface in the stillness of the night do they not?

And depending on what those things are, or our thoughts about them, such things always seem to loom larger than life,

Or take on energy of themselves in the nighttime
In Jacob's case, he was returning to an unresolved conflict of 20 years

His is a troubled past and it had finally caught up with him.

Little wonder really then, that in the stillness of the night, when it was quiet, Jacob felt very vulnerable

All of us have our Uncle Labans – the difficult people and situations God permits to enter our lives
We all have our Esaus – the situations or people of our childhood that remain unhealed memories
The matters of middle age that remains unresolved
The fears and regrets of maturity

All this we carry with us and this stuff tends to surface in quiet or still moments (i.e. night) until they are resolved.

When such things do surface they can result in us feeling very vulnerable. For at night or in stillness, busyness is not dominant. Thoughts tend not to be as orderly and controlled. The things we have been really good at pushing aside and saying “we’ll not think about that – rush at us like stampeding animals and we feel very vulnerable indeed. And like Jacob’s antagonist, there is no warning – the night work is just there and we can no longer ignore it.

The image of wrestling is I believe another touch point for us. Wrestling to ensure that the fears, feelings of despair, discouragement, regret do not overwhelm and carry into the next day.

Now, Jacob’s wrestling took a specific form and was undergone for a specific reason. But I think the image of wrestling holds... For sometimes the night work takes the form of struggle with bad dreams – you know the sort of dreams – you awake in a cold sweat, wound up in blankets and sheets, Trying to distinguish what is real and what is dream because you are not certain. Sometimes your own night work takes the form of reciting the promises of God and placing them next to the fears,

Unhealed memories

And anxieties that triggered the particular night work

In either case, the struggle is very, very real and it is like a wrestling match – taxing your emotional, spiritual, psychological and physical energies to the maximum.

And more often than not, the struggle lasts until dawn.

About what my night work wrestling is often triggered, I am not going to tell you, for you might think some of them to be ridiculous and silly

Maybe they are – in the cold light of day – but they cause ME to spend a lot of time in night work And maybe some of the things about which you have fears and anxiety would seem silly to others or to me.

Doesn't matter – for them because you to spend time in night work – *some things including wrestling night work.*

God's nearness and presence.

That is a theme that runs through the Jacob story – and it is a theme that runs through our stories as well.

We do not know how long it is before Jacob realizes that it is God and not some nameless horror with which he is wrestling – that is part of the mystery of the story.

But there is no doubt that while Jacob may have thought he began wrestling with an adversary He discovered that he was in the embrace of a loving God.

How so accurate and true in each of our lives. In our times of vulnerability especially – day or night – we may not be aware immediately of the nearness of God.

We may even struggle with God,

Run from him, ignore him, and cast him aside.

Nevertheless each of us is always in the embrace of God.

Hear again the Psalmist's affirmation in Psalm 139

**You have searched me,^(A) LORD,
and you know^(B) me.**

**² You know when I sit and when I rise;^(C)
you perceive my thoughts^(D) from afar.**

**³ You discern my going out^(E) and my lying
down;
you are familiar with all my ways.^(F)**

**⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.^(G) ¹³ For
you created my inmost being;^(A)
you knit me together^(B) in my mother's
womb.^(C)**

**¹⁴ I praise you^(D) because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,^(E)
I know that full well.**

**¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made^(F) in the secret place,**

**when I was woven together^(G) in the
depths of the earth.^(H)**
**16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained^(I) for me were
written in your book
before one of them came to be. [Psalm
139:1-4, 13-16]**

God is with us

And not in some nebulous, unknown or uncertain
way

But in the way we know – he is here.

That is an affirmation of this story.

If God was with the trickster Jacob – he most
certainly is with each of us.

Then there is the touch point of *wound and left
limping*

Jacob will always be reminded of his limitations –
his limp will be with him.

A characteristic of a Biblical character only – to have
wounds that make us limp in some way,

Wounds us that remind us that we are vulnerable
and oh so human.

No...absolutely not!!

When I began my calling to parish
ministry I was sent out by the national church to be
an assistant of a large church in the heartland of
southern Ontario.

It was a two year, renewable appointment – all graduating students had to do this at the time – be sent out to a church – it was called an OM appointment – ordained missionary.

To serve the congregation was wonderful. To serve with the senior minister – not so much! We had what one can charitably describe as a ‘failure of communicate.’

Two years less a day and I was done – I had no intention to extend the appointment – my health, and marriage would not have stood it.

So, I found myself without a church to serve and no idea where to go next.

I remember the Clerk of Katharine’s Presbytery stopping by the house to see how we were doing.

He knew all about my appointment and the senior minister with whom I had just completed two years less a day of service.

As we talked about the past couple of years at this large congregation, he said “Yes, Herb you will be and probably feel very wounded, but you are walking!”

“Wounded but walking” is a phrase I have come to appreciate as an accurate description of so many situations in my own life and in the lives of people I have served over the years

We DO experience events and circumstances in our lives with which we literally wrestle over, about or with.

Circumstances that will drive us to the mat,
Leave us emotionally, physical and spiritually spent

As we recover, the sense of limping is quite real.

In the end, there are only two choices as we recover from or are hit by the wrestling experiences of this life.

--we can allow those wounding times to embitter us. – that's the easier of the two choices

Or like Jacob and so many others we can acknowledge the wound and the limp and see them in some ways as a gift of God's grace

To through the wound and the limping, become more human, more sympathetic, more compassionate, kinder, gentler, more merciful – not only toward others, but to ourselves.

I think this is what happens in Jacob's case – his wound does not embitter – but draws him closer to God. He prays now as a regular part of life.

It is certainly what happens to St. Paul – in that passage about Paul's thorn in the flesh

Paul pleads with God to remove the thorn (again there is mystery here – we do not know the precise nature of the thorn

I wonder – was it a literal thorn or a physical limitation

Or a wounding experience caused from a situation, people or a group of people

God’s answer is that wonderful affirmation

Henry Koop’s favorite Bible verse

“My grace^(A) is sufficient for you, for my power^(B) is made perfect in weakness.^{(C)”(D)}

Is Paul embittered? No, the ‘thorn’ and God’s assurance have given him new perspective

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight^(E) in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships,^(F) in persecutions,^(G) in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.^(H) (II Cor. 12:9-10)

Not a perspective automatically or easily arrived at – let no one tell you it is.

For as far as we know, Paul’s thorn remains
As does Jacob’s limp

Our wounds we carry with us more or less for a lifetime.

It then become a choice doesn’t it –
Do we let the wound forever embitter us – and mark me, wounding can most certainly do this – to us and everyone else around us

OR, do we with persistent determination say, “I will not let this crush me or condition the rest of my life For you Lord are in control. Help me to see this in observable ways” .

My wounds and limps from my first parish leadership position are still with me – memory. But they do not have the toxic effects on my life they once did – that is owing to the grace of God and the prayers and support of a lot of people – many of whom are now part of that communion of the saints – that great company of heaven, that the writer to the Hebrews describes in chapters 11 and 12 of his letter.

With our wounding experiences that result in our limping, may the conclusion Jacob came to eventually be the dominant voice we hear

...Jacob called the place Peniel saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.

²⁴To him who is able^(A) to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence^(B) without fault^(C) and with great joy— ²⁵to the only God^(D) our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!^(E) Amen.^(F)