

8-2-26 sermon

Wrestling with the unknown

Genesis 32.22-31

Have you ever wrestled with the unknown in the middle of the night?

Have you ever gone to bed with something weighing heavily on your mind, so heavily, that sleep evaded you all night, and you greeted the light of dawn not refreshed, but exhausted? Have you ever watched a day approach that you simply dreaded? And as that day drew nearer, found it began to consume your waking thoughts? On the night before the dreaded day, you played out all the possible scenarios, all the possible outcomes, your mind racing all night, *even as you knew all your thinking would not affect the outcome of what would arrive with the dawn?* Perhaps you wrestled with a medical diagnosis. Or a scheduled medical procedure with no guaranteed outcome. Perhaps it was a job offer that would require uprooting your family again. Or, it was waiting to see if *your* name was on the list of those who were going to be laid off. Perhaps what kept some of us up was hearing the words so many of us dread to hear: “We need to talk.” Four words that can trigger all our insecurities and fears, our self-doubt and regrets. I wonder if for any of us, it was the night before a major family gathering when we knew we’d see that person we were estranged from – a parent, a sibling, a child, a former spouse – a reunion we dreaded.

Have you ever wrestled with the unknown in the middle of the night?

We’ve been hitting some of the highlights of the story of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis over the past few weeks. Most recently, the story of Jacob. Jacob – this “heel grabber,” “supplanter,” trickster and deceiver. Twin of Esau, who was the firstborn of Isaac and Rebekah by mere moments. Esau, whom Jacob tricked out of both his birthright and his father’s dying blessing. Esau, who swore to *kill* Jacob once their father died, causing Jacob to flee to his uncle Laban’s in Haran, where he will acquire not one but two wives, as we heard last week, in that most intriguing of stories! Wives who will compete for Jacob’s affection and to gain sons by him. Wives who will – over the course of 13 years, together with their maidservants – have 11 sons and one daughter by Jacob. Six by Leah, two by each of the maidservants, and one by Rachel, the final son to be born later. Jacob has also become wealthy at his uncle’s expense, by yet *more* trickery and – it must be said – some improbable sheep husbandry techniques, which you can read about in chapters 30 & 31. Laban’s sons are furious about the situation, breathing threats against Jacob. As Jacob considers what to do, his life in danger yet again, he is once more visited by God, who tells him it’s time to finally return home, with the assurance that God will keep his promise to protect Jacob. So, once again, Jacob finds himself fleeing from danger, taking his wives, children and flocks into the wilderness. Laban chases them down – and this time it’s *Rachel* who does the deceiving. But– following God’s intervention – Laban agrees to let them go.

Which brings us to this morning’s passage.

It’s been 20 years since Jacob last saw his brother Esau. Now he’s heading home for the big reunion, and even with God’s promise, it’s not difficult to imagine he dreads the prospect. He has to believe that Esau has not forgotten what his twin did to him, and must be asking what he can do to diffuse Esau’s anger towards him? He sends servants *to* Esau to let him know he’s on his way, with the message that he hopes “to find favor in his lord’s sight.” But when the messengers return, they tell

him, “Hey – your brother Esau is coming to meet you. Oh, and he’s bringing 400 men with him.” Whatever dream of a peaceful – if not happy – reunion Jacob might have dared to entertain, his worst nightmare is now upon him. He divides his flocks and servants into two groups, hoping that at least one group would survive if Esau attacks him, and then he takes his wives and children off with him, as he prepares to meet Esau. He prays to God, reminding God of the promises God has made to him, but this time God does not respond. So, Jacob sends gifts of livestock ahead of him to Esau, hoping to appease his anger. Then he leaves his family on one side of a stream, before crossing to face his brother, alone.

And that night, he wrestled with the unknown.

Now, the text just tells us that *a man* wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. A man who saw that he could not prevail against Jacob, and who, somehow, by merely touching Jacob’s hip, dislocates it. Now, I didn’t check with Dr Key whether that is actually possible, but if this was an ordinary man, that certainly sounds like a ninja move! We suspect, however that this unidentified person is not just some random assailant, and even with a dislocated hip, Jacob wrestles on. As the dark of night begins to lighten, the unknown figure says, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But Jacob keeps clinging to him, and says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The unknown man asks him,

“What is your name?”

Now, the last time Jacob had asked for a blessing, it was of his father. When he pretended to be Esau, in order to secure the blessing *he* longed for. Isaac’s eyes were dim, and he wasn’t convinced it was his first-born kneeling at his side. So he asked him, “Are you really Esau?”

“What is your name?”

Jacob lied, and said, “Esau.” And now he’s asked that question again, in response to his request for another blessing. I wonder if that memory came to mind in that moment? Well, this time he answers truthfully, and says, “Jacob,” and the man says, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” And just like that, the trickster becomes one whom “God preserves”, or “God protects.” We’re not quite sure what the name “Israel” means. But the name that will determine the trajectory of the entire story from this point on has now been bestowed: “Israel.”

Jacob asks this unknown figure with whom he has wrestled through the night the same question he has been asked: “What is *your* name?” But Jacob doesn’t get an answer, he gets a *question*: Why is it that you ask my name?” Then the man blesses him. The author of Genesis tells us, “So Jacob named that place, ‘Pen-i-el,’ for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” The story itself does not make it clear who this unknown assailant is: it suggests that the person wants to keep their identity *secret*. Not just by refusing to give their name, but by wanting to leave before the sun reveals their face. Which calls to mind the occasions we will read in the stories that follow this one: “No one can see the face of God and live.” But Jacob – now Israel – has already decided who this adversary in the night is. God. And he wants to know God’s name. But that privilege is reserved for Moses, who will be the first to hear ‘*ha shem*,’ “The Name” of God.

The story ends as the sun rises, with the newly re-named Israel limping towards the encounter with his brother... And that’s where the Lectionary reading ends. Next week’s reading jumps ahead to

chapter 37, when we'll hear yet another story of sibling rivalry! So, if you want to know what happens when Jacob and Esau finally meet after twenty years estrangement, you'll have to read chapter 33 for yourself!

Once again, we have a story which raises all kinds of questions.

Firstly – why didn't Jacob flee when he heard Esau was on his way with an army? What made him decide to face his brother, alone? Who exactly was Jacob's unknown assailant? *Was* it God? If so, why couldn't God prevail over a mere mortal? If it was a man – who? Maybe it was an angel, as most visual artists have decided to portray the person. The story is – perhaps intentionally – vague. What made Jacob hold on all night? And then ask for a blessing from his assailant? And why does the mysterious figure leave him with a limp? So many questions, yet again. But perhaps the best stories leave us with as many questions as they do resolution.

And then there's the perennial question for preachers: Is there a *specific* word from the Lord for us today? Maybe you've already heard one.

Maybe the word for some of us is the reassurance of being seen. Of hearing our own story in *this* story. To know that we're not alone in our *own* wrestling and that sometimes there's a blessing for us on the other side of it. Maybe even a new identity – a new name to replace the one that defined the life we're beginning to recognize we need to leave behind.

Maybe the word for some of us is the exhortation to keep wrestling. To not give up, even as we may feel overwhelmed by whatever it is we're wrestling with. Whether that's a decision; a difficult situation; fear; hope(!); maybe, a person. An exhortation to hold on, while we wrestle, to whatever gives us the strength we need to keep going, until we, also – in the mercy of God – prevail.

Maybe the word for some of us is – like Jacob – to keep moving towards what we fear. To face it head on, rather than yield to the temptation to run away from it. Perhaps even to move *towards* that person *we're* estranged from, with hope for reconciliation, as unlikely as we may believe that would be.

Maybe the word for all of us is to pray for those who are wrestling with the unknown themselves, those who are known to us, and those who are not.

As we've already noted, the story ends with Jacob limping into his unknown future. Limping towards his twin brother, and his 400 men. But limping with God's promise to go with him, just as God has been with this trickster throughout his story thus far. How often are the signs of God's intervention in our own lives revealed in *our* "limping," whatever that may look like. The scars and wounds we carry in body, or mind, or memory. Just as Jesus' resurrection was confirmed in the marks left by nails and spear.

So, friends, let us limp on.

Let us hold on.

Let us wrestle on.

Until – in the mercy of God – we too prevail.

Amen.