

NO HOLDING BACK

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Genesis 32:22-31 ~ Jacob wrestles with a mysterious night visitor.
Romans 9:1-5 ~ Paul writes, "I am speaking the truth in Christ."
Matthew 14:13 – 21 ~ Feeding more than five thousand.

Life is full of struggles: from our first gulp for air at birth, we struggle to survive. Sometimes it is easier than at others. Sometimes we can even forget that we are struggling. Sometimes, we wrestle with known enemies, while at other time we do not know who or what we are struggling against. It is somewhat of a struggle for me each Sunday as I prepare a message for all of you. I never know how a message will affect any one of you. All of our readings this week deal with aspects of struggle against forces both seen and unseen.

I would invite you to remember the story of Jacob with me. Twenty years before the incident recorded in today's reading Jacob has fled his fathers' home; he left with the clothes on his back, a bartered birthright and a stolen blessing.

Jacob lived up to his name – a name which means "heel catcher," or more simply, "one who deceives, or tricks another".

Jacob went to the land of Haran and there he practiced his art on his father-in-law, a man who also was rather crafty and tricked Jacob into marrying the wrong woman.

After twenty years Jacob fled his father-in-law's home, taking with him the great wealth that he had earned, a wealth measured in wives, livestock, and children and in fleeing the home of Laban, Jacob decides to return to his homeland for he has had a dream in which an angel of God has told him to return to his native land.

But there is a catch – as there so often is when we try to go home after leaving it under a cloud.

When Jacob returns he must face his brother Esau, the very brother whom he had taken advantage of, the very brother whom he had cheated out of his birthright. And Jacob is afraid.

So as Jacob approaches his homeland he sends a messenger to inform Esau that he is on his way and that he has become very wealthy and when the messenger returns he tells Jacob that Esau is coming out to meet him, and there are 400 men with him. This news does not encourage Jacob at all.

So Jacob divides his herds, and his people and everything he has into two thinking that just perhaps if Esau attacks him one group will escape.

And then he prays, and he sends five messengers to Esau, each a little after the other, each with a different gift of livestock, hoping perhaps to both impress and appease his brother. And then night falls.

It is at this point that today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures occurs. Esau is but a little way ahead of Jacob, sometime the next day they will meet. And Jacob is afraid.

To prepare for the morning Jacob sends his two wives, his two concubines, his eleven sons, and all the rest of his possessions across the stream called Jabbok.

He is left totally alone, in the dark, camped by a little stream wondering what will happen the next day, and something happens to him.

The Bible puts it this way: Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. We hear that this one whom Jacob wrestles with could not overpower him, so he wounds Jacob in the hip, but Jacob still will not let go. Even as the sun begins to rise Jacob and the man are still locked tightly together.

Finally the man pleads with Jacob to release him but Jacob refuses to do so until he receives a blessing. The man agrees to this condition, saying to Jacob, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

Jacob, at this point, asks the man his name but the man refuses to answer him, saying “why do you ask my name”. And then he blesses Jacob and disappears from our story. And Jacob gives the place where he camped a name - Peniel saying “It is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared”. And he limps because of the wound to his hip and rejoins his family and goes forth to meet Esau, and Esau receives him kindly, hugging him and welcoming him as a long lost brother.

It is an interesting story – but what do we make of it? Who or what was it that Jacob wrestled with? Was it his own fear? Or was it with his own personality that he struggled? Was it his habit of always looking for the advantage? Was it his way of doing wrong when he should do right?

What we know for sure about this incident is that it was hard, it was draining, and that it left Jacob with a mark, a distinguishing mark – a limp caused by an injured hip.

And we know too one other very important thing, namely that Jacob himself was convinced that he had struggled with an angel, that he was convinced that he had struggled with God, and that he had won something important – that he had won a blessing.

That is at least what Jacob thought, but the question remains, who did he really struggle with? The man, after all, refused to give his name.

While Jacob wrestled all that long night, he did not know with what he was struggling, he only knew that he would not let go until some good came of it.

And it was long, and it was hard, and it hurt and there was no holding back. Even though, Jacob had family and friends and wealth, he was alone in his struggle.

Then, in the Epistle reading today, Paul is wrestling with the issue of the inclusion of Gentiles within the people of God. As he wonders how this affects God’s covenant with Israel, Paul is in a reflective mood. It appears that someone, or some group, has questioned Paul’s loyalty to his Jewish faith and heritage. He spends so much time and gives so much of his care to the Gentiles that some are suspicious of him.

Paul defends himself: although he is a follower of Christ’s way, he is still a Jew. He says he would do anything, even give up his own life in Christ, if it would prove his sincere concern for his people. Paul struggles with his rich religious heritage and his present experience of the risen Christ.

The story of Jesus feeding the huge crowd obviously made a big impression on the early church because this story is contained in all four gospels. As an aside, it helps not to continue calling this story the feeding of the five thousand: the text clearly states

that there were five thousand men, “not counting the women and children.” We might more accurately call it the feeding the many thousands.

In the way Matthew presents this story, we can also imagine the wrestling that went on inside Jesus and the disciples that day. They have just learned of the death of John the Baptist which brought a tremendous jolt to the emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of Jesus. John was a friend, confidant, and relative of Jesus. To lose someone that close hurt Jesus deeply. Jesus decided to withdraw to a deserted place to pray and to meditate on the meaning of John’s death and the impact on his own life.

As the boat nears the shore Jesus realizes the crowd has preceded him. He takes pity on the crowd. Torn between the need to be alone to do his grieving, and the need to be compassionate, Jesus chooses to be compassionate. He healed their sick and then Jesus challenges the disciples to feed the crowd. They believe that they have nothing to give, except five loaves and two fish. This gift is transformed through Christ’s blessing, and it feeds the crowd with twelve baskets left over. There was no holding back.

How many of us have been in same situation as Jesus, needing to be alone and needed by others at the same time. It is a struggle to choose.

I believe that all of us, despite the mystery, can really understand today’s stories. I believe that all of have had, or will have, the same or similar struggles as Jacob, Paul and Jesus did.

And always a struggle is long, it is hard, and despite any help from family and friends, it is lonely and dark. For each of us there is a time when we must struggle and either win or lose a blessing. And in those times there is doubt, and confusion, often there is anger and despair, mistakes we have made catch up to us, and things we did not anticipate, and things we do not know the name of, seek to overwhelm us. And we are afraid. Afraid because the struggle itself is painful, afraid because deep down we know that if we give up, if we let go, we will be overwhelmed. We are afraid too, that even if we manage to survive the struggle that nothing will come of it but another struggle and then another.

I would hazard a guess that many of us carry inside of us some pain, some hurt, some issue with which we must struggle. It is not fun, but neither is it insurmountable or unbeatable. Piet Hein, the author of a set of books called “*Grooks*” gives us this rhyme in his *Maxim for Vikings*:

Here is a fact that should help you to fight a bit longer
Things that don’t actually kill you outright make you stronger.
Jacob struggle, he wrestled, he won and so can we.

There is a choice in our struggles, a choice in our dark nights when we are alone and must face that which we do not know, that which may be related to our past, that which may be connected to our future.

The choice is this: do we see the struggle as a struggle with angels, a struggle in which we can win a blessing or do we see it as simply and only unwanted pain?

We have, you and I, a name – the name of Christ and we, like Christ, also bear the name of Jacob. With Christ we are spiritual descendants of the man who struggled by the stream Jabbok and received the name Israel, “He struggles with God”.

We have a choice, our trials can be blessings to us, or wrestling can result in grace being heaped upon us, and our struggles can end in triumph and glory. Or we can give up and let go.

In an eerily specific way, today's stories are also the story of the North American Christian church at this moment. In what we used to happily call the "mainline" denominations, we struggle with the unknown. While some congregations flourish, attendance is down in the majority and if we look around seniors are the predominant attendees. Finances are slipping. Where the large denominations once had the ear of cabinet ministers, the secular world now ignores these denominations, or – with the exception of a few television shows – portrays them as quaint. Our members are not of one mind: gay and lesbian ordination and commissioning, women's rights, peace issues, the nature of Jesus, the very language we use to address God, the hymns we will or will not sing, and of course the most recent the legalization of same gender marriages – these matters divide us, sometimes even within the same congregation. Like Jacob, we don't know how to name what is happening to us, we don't know if we will see daybreak, and we fear what tomorrow will bring...

Like Jacob heading out for home, we need to know where we have come from, to recognize where we are going – because the North American church is in the process of being transformed. As Christians, we are being given a new identity, one so unfamiliar we may have trouble recognizing ourselves.

But we can learn about new identity, about transformation, from Jacob, from Paul, from Jesus. But the crucial point for the Church, hungry in the secular age for good news, is that blessing. It must have been very powerful – Jacob knew the moment it was given that it was God who had embraced and wounded and renamed him.

What is the church's blessing today? What is our wound? How can we who live within the church find the strength to hold on to our adversary in the darkness, until we too receive our blessing?

The long night of change seems endless, and we cannot discern the way ahead. At times, we seem on the verge of losing all we cherish – even our collective life. Why is God struggling with us, changing us, this way? What is this new identity God is giving us? Will we be able, like Jacob to walk with our limp, to be reconciled to those we have wronged, and to bless generations to come?

Jacob's story in particular assures us we will. As we wrestle and as we struggle with our doubts and our fears, in our own lives and as a church, we discover that God is good and God is for us, and God gives us a promise of good future, a promise of hope – a blessing. Amen.