

Wrestling with God

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Mary Keenan

Sunday, August 2, 2020, 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14:13-21

Earlier this week, one of my friends asked an open question on social media: "Is anyone not feeling like a hot mess today?" she asked. It was a run-of-the-mill weekday, nothing to make it different from a lot of other pandemic days - but it seems like everyone was feeling like a hot mess. That day and that week.

With a virus raging and the economy tumbling and too many restless kids at home or not enough friends at home - It is easy to feel like every task, every encounter is a struggle. Everybody is feeling like a hot mess. Every day is starting to feel like a long, sleepless night.

And so, when I look at the story of Jacob wrestling in the night with a mysterious man, I see a guy who might also feel like a hot mess.

Jacob was, in fact, a hot mess from birth. His name means trickster - and he lives up to it by scamming his brother and his father. He's a fighter from the start - wrestled his brother in the womb, contrived to steal his older twin's birthright and blessing from their elderly father. Tables turn and Jacob is then tricked by his future father-in-law into marrying the sister of the woman he loved.

And here he is now, fleeing his angry father-in-law, headed towards the brother he betrayed. It is enough to keep a guy up at night worrying. And that is exactly what happens. Jacob sends his wives and servants and children across the river to be safe and when he is all alone, he wrestles. All night.

At this point in the story I am right there with Jacob. How many times have I felt caught by my own bad choices? Tried to protect my loved ones by keeping them at bay from my turmoil? Maybe even tried to hide my true self from everyone, including God? You don't have to be a thief and a scoundrel to feel like the choices and circumstances of life leave you vulnerable to attack - whether it is judgment from friends or an angry sibling marching across the desert.

Life is full of twists and turns, opportunities and choices, that can leave us feeling like Jacob. Goodness, most of my teens and 20s were every bit as scandalous as Jacob's family squabbles. After all, he didn't have cars and college and probably didn't get a

credit card before he was quite ready...It can leave any of us wrestling, like Jacob, all night. Tossing and turning in anxiety and regret.

Like many of you, I've had restless, sleepless nights. Especially lately.

Sleepless because there is so much to fear and be worried about.

It seems like I ought to be able to DO something but I don't know what the something is. How am I going to keep my kids safe AND busy? Did I do the right thing going to my neighbor's door- even in a mask? My mom is turning 80 this month and I feel guilty that I can't be there - even though I know it's the best thing. How in the world am I going to help my daughter have school at home while I work?!

Does any of this feel familiar?

It is here, in the loneliness of a restless night that we see Jacob's story take an unexpected turn. In the depths of his anxiety, a man comes to wrestle with him thru the night. At first we don't know who this man is, all we know is that he and Jacob wrestle all night and the stranger does not prevail. As night ends, Jacob emerges with an injury, a blessing, and a new name.

It turns out the mysterious man with whom Jacob wrestled was God.

Now, we can talk about the meaning of the injury, the blessing and the new name, but it is important to note up front that before Jacob gets these things two other things happen first:

- 1) God comes to him
- 2) And they wrestle together

Here is the invitation that Jacob's story gives us today: God comes to us so that we might engage our whole selves with God, and it is thru that engagement, that wrestling, that we will be marked, blessed, and transformed.

Wrestling is conflict, it is direct engagement, it is struggle. We are not used to the idea that these are the kinds of activities that bring blessings - and yet that is what happens to Jacob.

Jacob is injured - he is marked. There is no denying, even in his physical body that he has wrestled.

Jacob is blessed - that is, he is shown mercy and favor by the God who knows all his faults and flaws.

Jacob gets a new name - he enters the fray as an individual called a Trickster. He limps away as one who struggled with God, as Israel.

He enters the night as HE and greets the new day as WE, because Israel is not just the name of this one formerly called Jacob, it is the name of a nation.

How does this relate to our current hot mess? Most of us are in a state of anxiety right now about one thing or another. Maybe all the things. We are made to be connected to each other and to God - but our tricks and worries and bad choices leave us feeling all alone.

It is into that loneliness, the mess of our lives, that God comes to us. And wrestles with us through all the mess. It is in that wrestling, that direct engagement with God that each of us and all of us will be marked, blessed, and renamed.

We are marked, scarred because the struggles of life transform our bodies and leave us with memories of where we've been and what we've survived. This is good news.

We are blessed because God is with us in the wrestling. There is no anxiety or shame or bad choice that will prevent you from being blessed by God. In the metaphor of wrestling, God will literally cling to you and you to God to work through it. This is good news.

We are renamed, we get a whole new identity because the struggles are not ours alone. Just as the man Jacob becomes the nation Israel, we become the Body of Christ by engaging directly with God. This is the best news.

There is no struggle or anxiety of yours that is yours alone. And at a time when our particular struggles have left us literally isolated from one another, it is a blessing to remember and know this.

When you are alone and feel stuck and scared, and you are wrestling with the hard things in life, consider that God might actually be with you in exactly those moments, wrestling with you through the night. Consider that what feels like a bruise might also be a blessing. Consider that what feels like a lonely struggle is actually the way your whole community - together with God - has and will engage with the holy and infuse it into the whole of life.

Keep wrestling. It seems dark right now, but God will greet the dawn with you. You will be marked, you will be blessed, and you will go forward transformed.

AMEN