

*Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

We all wrestle, with ourselves, wakeful in the night sometimes, when everyone else is sleeping.

We wrestle with our conscience, fears, memories, decisions. “Where am I going? What am I doing? Why is this happening?”

We wrestle with God: God present, God absent, “Where is God in this?”

Our wrestling is always in a context, of what’s happened, of what seems to lie ahead.

Jacob, too, wrestles in his own context. This wrestling match comes without warning. Just who it is he’s wrestling with is ambiguous, mysterious; but the wrestling is intimately connected with Jacob’s past and future.

It’s a long story. Genesis 25-36. Well worth reading and mulling over at some length, as David said last week. Here we can touch only on some of the high (or low) points of what leads up to this long night’s combat, and what follows.

Even before they’re born, Jacob and his brother Esau struggle together in the womb. Jacob, born right behind Esau, comes out still gripping his brother’s heel, not ready to let go; trying to get ahead of him, maybe. Hence his name, Jacob, which means “supplanter” and “trickster.”

He lives up to his name. He takes advantage of Esau, if he doesn’t quite trick him, and gets Esau to trade his birthright to be head of the family in their generation, for a bowl of vegetable stew. (Esau, you recall, was a hunter, provider of meat.) Then Jacob lies to blind father Isaac and receives from Isaac the blessing meant for Esau.

While hiding out with Uncle Laban in the old country—where he’s fled because Esau wants blood—Jacob engages with Laban in an exchange of tricks and deceits. It runs in the family, it seems. Jacob ends up a wealthy man, with two wives (Laban’s daughters), eleven sons, a daughter, servants, and large flocks and herds.

If you’re hoping for a morality tale this morning, with Jacob getting his just deserts or at least repenting and reforming, I’m afraid you won’t find it here. The truth is, no one in the story commiserates with Esau, and blessings keep piling up for Jacob.

We could say that, being practical, Jacob has the better leadership qualities. He has his wits about him, looks ahead, watches for opportunities, has drive, persistence, charm, courage to take risks. Esau thinks short term, is impatient, and a little foolish.

But Jacob is, at best, morally ambiguous; well, okay, he's mostly self-seeking, hardly moral at all—though he does love one of his wives. Yet, God definitely chooses Jacob, has promised to be his God, made him the bearer of the promise made to Abraham and Isaac: the land, plentiful offspring, that all the families of the earth will bless themselves by him.

Now, 20 years on, God is bringing Jacob back, has told him to return. On his way, the angels of God meet him. (32:1) He is being ushered in, with assurance of God's protection. (I am not making this up.)

Jacob sends a message to Esau that he's coming. A wise move. He wouldn't want to run into that brother by surprise! He lets Esau know that he's coming back a wealthy man, and that he wants "to find favor in Esau's sight." His messengers report back that Esau "is coming to meet you, and 400 men are with him." (32:3-6) Four hundred. Picture it. That is a lot of men.

Hearing this, Jacob is "greatly afraid and distressed". Well he might be, should be. But shaken though he is, he takes three strategic steps.

1) He divides his people, flocks and herds into two companies, so that if Esau destroys the one, the other may survive.

2) He prays. (32:9-12) Reminds God who he is: "God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac." Confesses that he's not worthy of the least of God's steadfast love and faithfulness, which is the truth. Asks for deliverance from Esau who "may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children (playing on God's sympathies)—and then what will become of God's promise? (Consider the consequences, Lord.)

3) He puts together a peace offering for Esau, more than 500 sheep, goats, camels, cattle, donkeys. Hoping the gift will appease him and that afterwards, "he will accept me."

I would like to believe that Jacob's heart is in all this; that even bracketed by his calculated moves, his prayer and professed reliance on God are genuine. That he has grown over time, through the experiences of his life and his encounters with God, and is in the process of being changed. That he is a man both faithful and practical, living in the world as it is. But it is ambiguous. Life is full of ambiguity. And the wrestling ends in a draw.

What is this wrestling? Who, or what, is it that leaps on Jacob in the dark and contends with him all night? Is Jacob wrestling with himself? With what he anticipates and fears from his brother? With God, as Jacob himself believes by the morning? ("I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.")

Perhaps it is all three. Perhaps there is no separating them out, the two brothers and God. Perhaps this is the beginning of the reckoning, or the reckoning itself.

The Lord surely *is* in this wrestling, inscrutable, mysterious, predictably unpredictable. Who chooses the younger over the elder before they are born.

Who knows all Jacob's ways and still gives him the promise.

Who, yet, flies at him, wrestles, but does not prevail over him; *does* not, not *cannot*.

Who will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

Who *asks* to be let go.

Who gives Jacob a new name and new identity: Israel, one who strives with God, one who must strive with God—a name that will cover the whole people. A name that covers all the families of the earth who bless themselves in him.

On this night, God and Jacob are forcefully present to one another, rolling together on the ground, arms and legs wrapped around each other. Intimate. As God has never let Jacob go, Jacob, finally, will not let God go, not until he has God's blessing.

The Lord blesses him, and is gone. But not until he has left his mark on Jacob, the enduring mark of a limp. A sign of Jacob's vulnerability, that his life does not belong to himself alone but to God and God's people. A sign of God's mercy; Jacob is wounded but not destroyed.

In the morning, Esau comes with the 400; doesn't yet know himself what he will do. Jacob limps toward him, bowing, humbling himself; perhaps actually humble. Then Esau knows. He runs toward his brother, throws his arms around his neck, kisses him and weeps.

"truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God," Jacob says—a face at once judging and forgiving, terrifying and blessing. (33:10)

From the gripping of the heel, to the grappling in the night, to the greeting with an embrace—it all fits together.

They talk. Each finds occasion to say to the other, "What I have is enough." No more struggle.

Sometimes we do get it right. Esau and Jacob did finally get it right here.

Esau invites Jacob to come home with him, to Seir, south of Canaan, in Edom. Jacob politely begs off. The children and flocks are tired, we'll follow you at our own pace. Esau heads home. Jacob does not follow, but turns north to Schechem, instead, to the land of Canaan, the promised land. Is anyone really surprised? Are you? Is Esau? Is God?

We hear Jacob's story today in the context of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of identity and belonging, of adoption into the family and household of God. Jacob, Esau, Isaac, Abraham, these are Charlotte' and Elle's ancestors, and ours. These are the ancestors of Jesus, the Messiah.

Not necessarily the first relatives we might want to introduce to Charlotte and Elle, but people they need to know. Like us, not one of these ancestors is perfect. But they are astonishingly loved, all of them, even in their imperfection.

A sacrament makes visible what is invisible, opens us to the power and presence of the steadfast love and mercy of God. Jacob's story belongs here. It is as much about God as about Jacob, and us. This mysterious, puzzling God who will not leave us, not even when we are at our most foolish, cowardly, or stubbornly self-seeking. Who wants nothing more than for us to turn and hold fast to him, and who will do anything for that to happen.

Is the tradition advocating that we go out and behave as scoundrels like Jacob? No, I think not. Something more like,

This happened. (After all, who would make up stories like these about the family's patriarchs and matriarchs?)

They got some big things wrong. Sometimes they got it just right.

Always, and most mysteriously, the Lord was at work in and through them to bring about blessing for the whole human family.

Something to wonder over. Somehow the Lord is most mysteriously in the midst of it all, working to bring about some unlikely and as yet unimagined good.

Where is this God at work, even now, in the ambiguities of our own lives? In our families? In our wrestling together, in the Vestry and in town meetings, sorting and sifting through our different perspectives around our outreach and finances? In the strivings of our national leaders around our national debt and common life as a nation?

These are questions to wonder over, indeed.