

Genesis 32:22-31

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

During the last year we put an addition on our house. In the process, I gained a new appreciation for how valuable it is to have a wide variety of tools. —The right saw, or paintbrush, or chisel, or drill bit can make all the difference in how easily and beautifully a project is accomplished. When there is work to be done, it's a joy to have the right tool—and every tool has its place.

And that's led me to think about the church as a toolbox. My encounters in churches over the years have convinced me that most of us long to be more useful to God. We have the sense that we were born to be and do more. We want to pour our energies into work that matters. We want to leave blessing behind us in the world. We come here, in part, to lend our lives to something—or someone—bigger than we are.

But often, even if we have identified that longing, we don't know how to begin to answer it. We may be asked to serve on a committee or take on a special project —and sometimes that work surprises us—we uncover new gifts and new life. The work may be hard, but we feel God stretching us. We sense that we are being well-used, that God is bringing fruit from our labor.

But at other times the work we are asked to do may not feel like such a good fit. Sometimes weariness and frustration may be indications that it is time to let go of a particular task; we may be needed elsewhere.

All of this makes me wonder if our ability to serve God in the world, to be useful to our brothers and sisters, depends at least partially on the degree to which we know ourselves—the extent to which we will accept, and offer, both our gifts and our limitations in the world. Maybe we always need to be asking “What kind of tool am I—are we—now? As life has honed and tempered us, how might God want to use us in the next season?”

I think that Jacob is on just such a journey of self-discovery in the passage at hand. He is being prepared for what waits for him, for the work God still has for him to do.

In this mysterious passage Jacob arranges his circumstances so that he will be alone in the night. He sends his wives and children, along with his remaining possessions to the other side of the river gorge. In a place where travelers were known to be at risk of ambush, he faces the darkness in his surroundings and in his heart at the same time. And the ambush comes.

What's the hardest night you've ever spent? Maybe it was a night of wretched illness, or keeping watch with another who was in pain. Maybe it had to do with despair that washed over you and robbed you of sleep, or a conflict whose resolution you could not imagine. Whatever the circumstances, that memory may help you to imagine Jacob's plight.

All night Jacob wrestles with his attacker. In the process he is wounded, in the joint of his thigh, and I can't help wondering if the placement of the wound is not symbolic. Elsewhere in Genesis, when a vow is to be made, the one promising puts a hand beneath the thigh of the one to whom the promise is made—signifying that life itself depends on keeping the promise. I wonder if the location of Jacob's wound signifies that his faithfulness in relationship has been less than complete. His wound represents a piece of his character.

At one level, this story is about Jacob coming to terms with who he is. His attacker's first question for Jacob is "What is your name?" And you will remember that this is a question Jacob has had a hard time answering truthfully in the past. When a blessing from his father was on the line, Jacob claimed to be his brother, Esau. But here, Jacob answers truthfully; he lets himself be known in order to receive the blessing actually intended for him.

Jacob's need for blessing, his desire to sense God's life flowing through him, is so great, that he will endure great struggle, great pain, to know that sense of connection.

And the blessing does come. Accompanying the blessing is a new name for Jacob, a name that re-casts his identity. Jacob is told: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Jacob's orientation to the world does not fundamentally change—he remains a striver—(and he will keep being called Jacob, as well as Israel) but this twice-named man comes to understand that God honors his longing for

engagement. God will even come to him and struggle with him, in a way that Jacob can bear. God will use his struggling to bless the world.

There's an invitation here for all of us. We don't have to worry about not being wired in the same way as our sister or brother. We don't have to pretend to be someone else. We are useful to God and to the world just as we are. And the places where we are wounded—the places where we feel “less than”—may be the places from which our most powerful ministry will flow.

Jacob's character does not change fundamentally as a result of his long night of wrestling—he remains always a striver—someone who is somewhat at odds with the world—but we do see evidence of change in Jacob as the morning dawns.

Before his long night of wrestling, Jacob had positioned himself at the very back of his entourage. He was preceded not only by all of his flocks, his servants, and his wealth, he was preceded by every single member of his family. He put everything he could between himself and his estranged brother. But when the morning dawns, even in his exhaustion, even in his wounded state, Jacob makes his way to the front of the family procession. He no longer hides behind his wealth and offspring. He discovers a measure of courage in his night of struggle. If he can face his own darkness, if he can face God, then he can face the brother he has wronged.

But he leaves that encounter wounded; he limps away with new awareness of his limitations. He is wounded, but he is enough. God will use him as he is; he does not have to pretend to be otherwise. Jacob's encounter with God does not make him invincible, but it does make him more courageous.

Coming to know ourselves as children of God, as wounded brothers and sisters, does not make any of us less vulnerable. Quite to the contrary, our wrestling with God and each other exposes our vulnerability—but in the process of letting ourselves be known, we have the chance to become freer, braver, more appreciative of our own and each other's gifts.

Jacob will bow to the ground seven times on the way to meet his brother, taking the posture of a servant, acknowledging the blessing he has received. But when his brother Esau finally approaches, when Esau rushes toward him, it is not with the fervor of an enemy, but with the embrace of a brother. Esau falls on Jacob's neck and kisses him and together, they weep.

Jacob responds to his brother by saying, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favor."

Jacob has been twice blessed, for the wrestling embrace of his God and the tender embrace of his brother both are invitations to deeper relationship.

I visited with someone not long ago, who is contemplating the end of her life. When I asked her what has brought her joy, she said, in part, "accepting who I am, and using the talent God has given to me". She reminded me a bit of Jacob. She reminded me of the invitation that waits for all of us—