Sunday, 8/2/20

**Genesis 32:22-31**

22The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25When 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. 26Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” 27So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” 29Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. 30So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” 31The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

**Sermon**

Some of these stories from the first several books of the Old Testament remind me of the “origin stories” given to comic book superheroes: the characters often exhibit supernatural powers, strange, unbelievable things happen, some of the characters are villains while others have changes of heart, and readers sometimes end up wondering what exactly just happened. (I translated the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac in a Hebrew class nearly twelve years ago and I still couldn’t tell you exactly what the story is about.) This story is a good example. Jacob is returning to his family of origin after living with his uncle Laban for twelve years. The author doesn’t tell us much about Jacob’s state of mind, but most likely he’s on edge because his brother Esau, who Jacob is going home to, is probably still angry at Jacob for cheating him, and he’s also running away from Uncle Laban after tricking him. This trip home could end badly. (My first introduction to Jacob was in 5th grade when my church performed *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*; I became aware of his favoritism towards Joseph but didn’t realize until years later that unfair behavior towards his family was such a pattern for him.) At this point we reach the strange part of the story: Jacob sends his family ahead of him, and he’s left alone. Suddenly a man appears and wrestles with him until daybreak. The author leaves us without an explanation of what’s going on, but Jacob walks away saying that he’s seen the face of God.

So much is strange about this story. This man who wrestles with Jacob is never identified; he even refuses to tell Jacob his name. The traditional Christian explanation has been that Jacob is wrestling with either an angel or God. I’ve used this passage to preach about people wrestling with God by asking the hard questions and being open to new perspectives, and it still seems like a valid point, but this time I’ve been struck by a central issue about this story: the man Jacob wrestles with isn’t identified as God. The text says, “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” This is where this story feels like a superhero origin story—Jacob is alone, wrestling with an unidentified man.

Who is this man? Some readers have said that it’s Esau coming to get back at his brother; others say it’s a robber trying to take his stuff (with the animals, clothing, and presumably food he’s carrying with him, someone of his time might consider him worth robbing). But maybe this man who Jacob wrestles with is Jacob himself. This passage comes at a transitional time: Jacob has deceived his blind father to be given his twin brother’s portion of the inheritance and run from Esau to Laban’s house far away; there Jacob and Laban worked the land together and dealt dishonestly with each other, which culminated in Jacob taking a sizeable share of Laban’s livestock and heading back home during the night. He’s gone from living with his parents and twin brother to living with his uncle and the extended family to being on the road with two wives, children, and livestock, and now, on the last leg of a return trip to his parents and his brother, with no idea how he’ll be greeted given how he left things, he’s staying behind while the rest of the family goes on ahead. This seems like the first moment of peace and quiet that he’s had for a long time. He’s alone with his own thoughts, and I imagine that the questions start: what have I done with my life? Is Esau still angry? Is there any hope of me receiving grace after the way I’ve behaved? It’s not hard to imagine Jacob wrestling with these doubts during the night. You might think he’d be exhausted or too stressed out to move forward by morning. Instead, after his night-long wrestling match, he limps away from the experience thinking he had seen God’s face.

Our lives can feel more like Jacob’s than we realize. Most of us have families of one sort or another, jobs that have us in close contact with coworkers, and an unending series of decisions to make. Every pastor can sympathize with this: weekly sermons, sick parishioners, committee meetings, classes, and Sunday worship give me a lot to every week. And then came a quarantine. Suddenly I felt like Jacob beside the Jabbok river, alone in the dark with my thoughts. How can you lead a worship service with nobody in the sanctuary? How can you care for parishioners you aren’t allowed to visit? How can MATE, whose board I’d just joined, continue to function? How will we teach our children about the faith? How can we have those important meetings so that we can continue to make decisions? What can “church” possibly look like at a time when we can’t gather together? The isolation brought up these questions, and it also gave me time to wrestle with them until I came up with answers. The answers haven’t been perfect—I’m really tired of Zoom—but they’ve helped me get through this time, and they’ve helped me think more deeply about what the future of church should look like and how we can reach out to people. Most importantly, I’ve found that God has been present even as I groped about in the dark trying to figure out where I was going.

We’re all like Jacob at times, feeling like we’re in the dark, trying to work through all kinds of doubts and fears. The questions don’t just come up during pandemics, and they’re about more than the church. We have illnesses that make us face mortality, broken relationships and emotional wounds that need healing, unemployment that makes us wonder if we can support ourselves, and worries about pandemics, injustice, and basic decency that can make you wonder if God is done with us. It’s overwhelming. The isolation gives us more time to dwell on our anxiety—but it can also be a time to face up to things and ask for God’s grace. That seems to be what Jacob does: he faces up to his doubts, and to his past behavior, and finds the courage to move forward.

Jacob walks away from his nightlong wrestling match with a limp, and with a sense that he’s seen God’s face. That doesn’t necessarily mean that the unnamed man is himself God; I think Jacob says “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” because he’s taken stock of his own behavior, faced his anxiety, and found that God has enough grace not to abandon him. Jacob has found the courage to journey back home, where, that morning, he and Esau are reunited and Jacob again feels like he’s seen God’s face.