

After Wrestling with Angels, You Are Different

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Genesis 32:22-31, esp. v. 31

“The sun came up as [Jacob-Israel] left Peniel, limping because of his hip.”

Jacob wrested the patriarch Isaac’s blessing away from his older twin brother Esau. Shortly thereafter, Jacob left Canaan to find a wife from his mother’s people in Haran. During his sojourn, Jacob was very sharp in his dealings with Laban, his father-in-law (and uncle). Indeed, Jacob had been something of a con artist all his life. Now after twenty years absence he returned to the land of Canaan where God’s promise and his destiny would be fulfilled. As he approached from Haran, he did so with large flocks, multiple wives and many children. He was a successful man, but he must have feared meeting his brother Esau. Jacob camped at the Jabbok River in modern day Jordan. There is a ford there. He watered his flocks and learned Esau was coming to meet him with a coterie of 400 armed riders. What did he suppose? Naturally he assumed Esau would avenge his trickery years before. He sent ahead gifts for Esau to appease the brother’s anger. He sent his wives and children over the river with the flocks and spent a night by himself on the north side of the river. It was only he—no wives, no possessions, no children—just Jacob. He had to come to terms with the dark side of his past, the side that had led him to cheat his brother Esau.

After dark fell, a shadowy figure joined him, and the two wrestled all the night long. The rabbis have three interpretations of this unnamed adversary. He could have been a demon, a river sprite. If this is so, we moderns might say Jacob wrestled with ‘his’ demons that night. It also could have been a dream and Jacob wrestled with himself and his past. Or, third, it could have been an angel (or God). Jacob had one of those moments many experience. When I have been in a situation like Jacob’s and rolled around in my bed sleepless with worries, my adversary could have been any of the three: a demon, myself, or the Lord. Most often these encounters are occasioned by something we have done or not done. Whether demons, my conscience or the Lord, it feels very much the same. Genesis is discrete, never telling us the adversary’s identity, except indirectly. In the wrestling, Jacob gave the adversary as good as he got. He had a hold of the wrestler and would not let him go. Jacob asked his name. In the story the adversary never revealed his own name; however, he did give Jacob a new name. In that name is a clue to the wrestler’s identity. “No longer shall you be Jacob. Your name will be Israel, for you have striven with God and survived.”¹ When the long night was over, Jacob-Israel called the place Peniel, which means “God’s face.”² Thus, Genesis hints that it was God whom Jacob wrestled that night.

Jacob was changed and not just in name. His hip was put out of joint by the other wrestler and thereafter Jacob walked with a limp.³ You may ask if it was God, why did he do such a mean

¹ Genesis 32:28.

² Genesis 32:30.

³ Genesis 32:25.

thing? Well, people do not come away from a close encounter with God ever quite the same as before. God changes you and, at times, it hurts. In my own experience this is all part of growing into a new relationship with God and yourself.

I was eighteen when I went off to college at TCU. As many sons did, I struggled with my father, arguing about this and that, often politics. I was trying to establish my independence, a natural thing at that age. In those days I had a very childish view of my father. One particular argument we had at the evening dinner table during the Thanksgiving break from college in my freshman year I remember vividly. It was about the politics of the Vietnam War, a favorite sparring topic of teenage sons in those days with fathers who had served in World War 2. My mother cried as she listened to us go at it. So acrimonious was the moment, I dreaded coming back home for Christmas, figuring we would have a rematch. But a strange thing happened after that fight. We never fought that way again. I don't quite know what happened. We both must have decided to avoid subjects on which we disagreed. In any case, over the next few years, I began to see my father less as someone I had to fight to get free of and more as an adult parent. I began to see him as he was. I had never noticed his humor, his wisdom, his perseverance so long as I struggled to assert my independence from him. But after that verbal tussle with him my first year of college, something happened to us both. We no longer fought or felt we had to. We knew what to say and when to be quiet with one another. Our relationship changed from one of child to adult father to one of adult son to adult father. Funny thing as that relationship changed, so did my relationship with God. I began to see God differently as well. I was doing my best in my late teens to throw off the views of God that I learned in church school. I thought God was too demanding, too judgmental, too strict. (An odd coincidence that I viewed Joe Stinson the same way?) I became quite the liberal in matters of theology and struggled against the God I assumed my church believed in. As my relationship to my human father improved, interestingly, I stopped struggling so much with God, too. Are these related? Of course.

Jacob's father Isaac is not a very large figure in Genesis. Isaac was nearly blind and very old when Jacob tricked him and got the family blessing. One suspects that when Jacob quickly and quietly departed Canaan for Haran to seek a wife from their people, it was as much to escape Isaac as Esau. As Jacob left Canaan he had a vision in a dream—we know it as *Jacob's ladder*⁴—in which God told him someday he would return to fulfill the promise to his grandfather Abraham. Some twenty years later, Jacob did return to claim his promise. He saw his ancient father before he died,⁵ and he was also reconciled with his brother Esau.⁶ In Haran, Jacob was consumed with successes, often gaining from his dealings with his father-in-law, Laban. About the same time he settled and patched up things with all these family members, he also came to terms with this promise that had haunted him all his life. This was with God and it even goes back before Jacob's birth. It was a promise, but to a young man, a promise like that is much like a curse. Now he came back to his homeland and to God, too.

There is an interesting detail in the story in light of what I said about the connection in my emotional and spiritual life between my father and God as I grew out of adolescence. Genesis reported a speech Jacob made when he was reunited with his brother Esau. He said to

⁴ Genesis 28:10-17.

⁵ Genesis 35:27-29.

⁶ Genesis 33:4.

Esau, “When I saw your face, *it was as the face of God* smiling on me.”⁷ All translations struggle to make sure no one thinks Jacob believed his brother to be God. It was the welcoming forgiveness with which Esau greeted his rascally brother that allowed Jacob to glimpse God in Esau. Certainly the reconciliation of the two brothers affected their relationship. But is it not clear that the forgiveness with which Esau welcomed Jacob also affected their understanding and relationships with the God of their ancestors? It is probable that Esau came to meet his brother with the 400 armed men because he expected to meet the same old Jacob, but instead met a brother named Israel, one who had struggled with God and come out with a new name, a new identity, a new comfort with his role as God’s man. Israel was different from Jacob. The change is partly symbolized by Jacob-Israel’s limping after the encounter at Peniel by the Jabbok River. No relationship stays the same after an encounter with the Lord. We focus on how we have a new way of looking at God after coming to him. But the new connection with God also affects our relationships to our parents, our siblings, our children, everyone in our lives.

After the adversary blessed Jacob, Jacob named the place Peniel (which means ‘God’s Face’) because, he said, “I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!” The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.⁸

Isn’t it interesting that Jacob-Israel mentioned so often in this story that he saw *God’s face*? Note also that he limped across the river to face his brother. You don’t come away from a close encounter with God without a change in you. And it is not just a difference inside you. It inevitably changes the way you relate to other people, particularly your family.

End

After Wrestling with Angels.DOC

⁷ Genesis 33:10. (*The Message*)

⁸ Genesis 32:30-31.