

“Limping Toward Sunrise”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Genesis 32:22-31
Luke 18:1-8

Jacob stayed up all night, wrestling with an angel until he received a blessing. Rachel Wren calls this “perhaps the best description of the life of faith in the entire bible.”

The bible doesn’t actually describe the man as an angel, just simply *aiish* which means in Hebrew “a man”-- and yet later, Jacob declares the name of that site Peniel, which means “face of God.” So, we never get a full explanation about whether this mysterious character is a man, or God, or something else.

Whoever this stranger was, the struggle went on through the night and somehow, this man, or angel, or God, was **not** able to defeat Jacob. Realizing this, the man of God struck Jacob on the hip then demanded, “Let me go, for the day is breaking!” But Jacob, always gaming for a blessing, held on, saying, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And so, Jacob received this blessing: a new name, Israel, which means “struggles with God.” And because he forever walked with a limp from where the angel disjointed his hip, his body always showed the mark of that encounter. (the bible goes on to say, by the way, that is the reason to this day Israelites don’t eat meat from the thigh bone-- because Jacob was struck on the hip).

Israel becomes more than a man. Israel becomes a tribe, and then a nation, and even more than that, the name grows to symbolize all the people of God. Let that sink in: our name, as descendents of God’s blessing, is this: Struggles with God.

How do we struggle faithfully? Some would say that faith should make everything work out. They are wrong.

I recently listened to a podcast with Anderson Cooper from CNN interviewing Stephen Colbert about grief¹. Anderson Cooper had lost his father at age 10 to a heart attack, and then 10 years later, his brother had died from suicide. When Colbert was also 10 years old, his father and two brothers were killed in a plane crash. Colbert talked about how his grief stuck to him in various ways, and he viewed his life through the lens of grief. There was a part of him that thought he would never live past 50. “I would do this horrible math with each of my sons,” he said, fearing he would die as each of them approached ten years of age.

¹ See “Stephen Colbert: Grateful for Grief” on the *All There Is with Anderson Cooper* podcast, Sept. 21, 2022

Colbert describes his grief “like living with a beloved tiger. It can surprise you, it can pounce on you. And it can really hurt you, but it’s my tiger, and it’s going to live as long as I do.” Over the years, Colbert has come to have gratitude for his grief. He says if you are going to be grateful for your life, you also have to be grateful for your suffering, because that is a part of living. Instead of treating grief like a trap of depression, he sees it as a doorway– “because you’re going to be a different person on the other side of it.”

Jacob was similarly changed by his struggle that night with a stranger. He came out a new man– his name, his limp, his calling. The man he was before? This was the trickster who stole his twin brother’s blessing and birthright. Although Jacob was the second-born of twins, he came out grasping his firstborn twin Esau’s heel– and for that reason, he was named Jacob, which means “he supplants”. He had taken so much from his brother, he ran away, for fear that Esau would kill him– and be justified in doing so. Decades passed, and finally Jacob was ready to confront his brother, just on the other side of the Jabbok river . But first, he had to cross that river and cross that night of the man he was, to the man he would become.

From time to time, I get a call or a message from someone in the community who is not connected to this church or to any church. They find themselves in the midst of a struggle, and I am the only pastor whose direct contact info they have. And so they ask me, “will you pray for me?” I’m honored to be considered the go-to and support their prayers. Someone recently told me, “I’m literally on my knees begging for light at the end of this tunnel.” I imagine that this person will find their Peniel moment: that is, they will make it through this nighttime of struggle, and the sunlight will come. But they will also make it through, like Jacob, **marked** and changed by their struggle. In this change, in this marking, perhaps they will even see the face of God.

The theme of struggle gets repeated in today’s gospel passage. Jesus’ parable tells of a widow who keeps struggling for justice against her opponent. But her pleas fall on the cold ears of a judge who “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” Still, the widow persisted, until she wore the judge down so much that he said, “because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she does not wear me out.” The Greek translation gives an even more dramatic description-- there, the judge says he will grant justice “so that she won’t give me a black eye.”

I find it a little ****funny**** that Jesus compares God to the unjust judge, as if to say, “look at this man, who doesn’t care about justice or believe in God. If he can grant mercy to the persistent widow, won’t God grant mercy both day AND night?”

The funny thing about this parable is that many of us experience God as *exactly* like this unjust judge: distant and disinterested in what struggles bring us before God. But the widow– in a way, she’s like Jacob, isn’t she?– pinning the man who is a stranger down until she can get a blessing out of him. It’s amazing, isn’t it, that she can even muster the effort to do that, considering all she has lost already; as a widow, she not only lost her partner; she also lost her social and financial standing. I suspect that her persistence was not not an act of faith as much as it was an act of survival.

I think our survival as a church is sometimes a struggle, and it has to take the persistence of that widow. Here's the obnoxious thing about belonging to a small church: if you stick around long enough— meaning a couple of months— people will *love* you, and they will ask you to take part in what we are trying to build. The obnoxious part of that is that it becomes hard to hide in the pews, or not in the pews. The church will unabashedly ask you to volunteer for committees, teach or mentor our children or youth, usher, help out with coffee hour, feed the homeless, manage our money, do a creative worship drama, join the choir or play special music, take a role in ordained leadership, come to bible study, and help landscape our church grounds... and those things are just ***this*** Sunday's asks. I tell you, sometimes I feel like the persistent widow, asking, asking, asking, and getting told "no, no, no"-- and I know that is also how the nominating committee feels when they do their work— so be nice to them if you get a call from them. They are looking for elders and deacons this month for their 2023 nominations. Now, let me tell you, I understand that people need to draw their boundaries for time and energy, and I totally respect doing what you need to care for your body, mind, and spirit. And, I am a firm believer in putting things to rest when the energy simply is not there— as we have done with big productions such as the Christmas Bazaar and the Garage Sale. Allowing things to die sometimes gives way for new life and new leadership to emerge.

But at times, I find myself asking, *why am I always pushing for things that people just don't seem to want to do?* And just when I am ready to toss my hands and efforts into the air in frustration, right when I'm about to side-eye the walk of Christian discipleship and say "maybe it's not all that," virtually when I'm about to proclaim to Session that this is a Sunday-only church that should focus on the worship service alone, someone says,

"I'd be **glad** to help."

And then they offer what joy and enthusiasm and gifts the Spirit has placed in them, and others start to notice and find joy and meaning in taking part, too, and we find that we are able to create something beautiful and needed for the work of heaven here on earth. Sometimes, we even find that lives are changed. And so begins again the foolish enterprise of the ministry we do together here.

As for Jacob, whom we now call Israel, as darkness lifted and he found himself limping toward the light, he had a new definition of what blessing meant. It did not come in the satisfaction of winning things for himself. It wasn't his brother's blessing becoming *his* blessing, or his brother's birthright becoming *his* birthright. Even winning the struggle with the unknown stranger— that wasn't his fight alone. His satisfaction came in what he could build for a whole people. Our satisfaction can come in knowing that there is blessing at the end of our struggle, and that though the dawn may expose our marks and our limbs, our ability to persist in relationship with God will point us toward justice, mercy, and even- as we know through the one who bore scars when he rose from the dead— resurrection.