

JACOB'S HOLY LIMP

Genesis 32:22-31

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on August 2, 2020, the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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 Peniel, limping because of his hip.

I.

From the time Jacob was conceived in his mother Rebekah's womb, he lived in *conflict* with nearly everyone in his *immediate circle*, including his twin brother Esau.

- The Genesis narrator tells us that Jacob and Esau "struggled together within" their mother's womb, leading her to cry out to God even before their birth: "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"¹
- To which God answered:

Two *nations* are in your womb,
And two *peoples* born of you shall be *divided*...
The one shall be stronger than the other;
The elder shall serve the younger.²

According to this answer, Jacob was *destined* to live in *conflict*, in *division*.

- At birth, his brother Esau came out first, but Jacob followed immediately, *gripping his brother's heel* as they emerged from the birth canal.³
- As they grew older, the divisions widened, as Esau was a hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob, a quiet man, living in tents,⁴ studying perhaps, but perhaps plotting as well, plotting the destiny that he, the younger, will be served by the elder.
- The parents divided over their children as well: Rebekah favored Jacob, and Isaac favored Esau.⁵

¹ Genesis 25:19-22.

² Genesis 25:23.

³ Genesis 25:24-26.

⁴ Genesis 25:27.

⁵ Genesis 25:27-28.

- Jacob soon stole his birthright from Esau⁶; and later, colluded with Rebekah to trick Isaac into blessing Jacob rather than Esau,⁷ who as firstborn was caught in the new winds blowing in which “the elder shall serve the younger.”

Because a blessing, once bestowed, is irrevocable, and because Esau is out to kill him in revenge, Jacob fled for his life and went to live with his mother’s brother Laban in another country called Canaan.⁸

True to form, Jacob and Laban soon found themselves enmeshed in conflict:

- Jacob fought with Laban over which of Laban’s daughters Jacob would marry and when the marriages would occur.⁹
- He fought with Laban over the sheep and goat business they shared.¹⁰
- Jacob fought as well, with Laban’s sons, his cousins-in-law, who as heirs of the sheep and goat business, had a vested interest in its prosperity and their succession to its ownership.¹¹

Their conflict lasted over twenty years.¹² With uncharacteristic – almost British – understatement, the narrator says: “And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before.”¹³

Yet it was only after *the Lord* spoke to Jacob that Jacob decided to return to Israel.¹⁴

So after years of conflict with nearly everyone in his life, conflict in which Jacob had often been the *instigator*, returning home to Israel meant facing the brother whom he had twice cheated and who had tried to kill him in response. Yet Jacob returns, at the command of the Lord, seeking to “find favor”¹⁵ with his brother, hoping against hope to reconcile with Esau.

It is at this point that our story picks up.

Jacob is on one side of the river, having sent a lavish peace-offering of livestock to Esau; and Esau is on the other side, surrounded by 400 troops he has brought in an expected conflagration with Jacob. Jacob sends his family and his servants and his goods to safety. He makes camp for the night and awaits Esau’s response to his gifts.

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,

⁶ Genesis 25:29-34.

⁷ Genesis 27:1-40.

⁸ Genesis 27:41-45 and 28:1-5.

⁹ Genesis 29:1-30:24.

¹⁰ Genesis 30:25-43.

¹¹ Genesis 31:1-2.

¹² Genesis 31:38.

¹³ Genesis 31:2.

¹⁴ Genesis 31:3-4.

¹⁵ Genesis 32:5.

“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.”

II.

The most mysterious thing about this text is the identity of the night creature. Ink has flowed through centuries of Biblical interpretation concerning who this creature might be.¹⁶

- Is it a *night demon* or *evil spirit*, emerging from the river, alive at night, invisible by day?
- Is it a *guardian of the ford*, or *bridge troll*, a more menacing version of Clarence in *It's A Wonderful Life*?
- Is it a *guardian angel for Esau*, or even a *bodyguard* recruited from among his troops, to ensure that Jacob doesn't prevail a third time?
- Is it *Esau himself*, disguised, at night?
- Or is it an *angel sent by God*, whose mission is to be with and protect Jacob, as God had promised when he commanded Jacob to return home?
- The narrator at first refers to this creature as “*a man*,” but if he is indeed human, he has the power to name and bless, a power he seems to lose when the sun comes up. As the wrestling match proceeds into the wee hours of the morning, both the creature and Jacob speak of the creature as a god, whom Jacob sees “face to face” during the match. Is the creature the *Holy One*?
- Finally, it may be that in his anxiety and fear, the creature and the wrestling match itself are *figments of Jacob's imagination*, characters in a dream, a struggle within a graphic nightmare.

Who is this creature of the night?

We don't know for sure, but whoever the creature is, the wrestling match lasts all night, and it seems to end in a draw.

- The creature to prevail over Jacob, refuses to bless Jacob until he is ready, refuses to give Jacob his name and injures Jacob permanently; yet the creature cannot free himself from Jacob's grasp without putting Jacob's hip out of joint, and then flees as the sun comes up.
- Jacob hopes to prevail, but never gets the creature's name and comes out of the match with a permanent limp, though he does secure another blessing and a change of name that marks the destiny of his people Israel.

In addition, this event is so significant that the people of Israel remember it and designate a food prohibition in its honor throughout the ages.

¹⁶ These possibilities are found in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Genesis 32:22-32n.

III.

But what has always attracted my attention about the story at an even deeper level is the *limp* – the fact that in his wrestling with God, Jacob emerges blessed, *but* limping, limping, *but* blessed. Limping *and* blessed!

You see what I have learned over time is that nearly all of us have something in our lives about which we wrestle with God, something over which we are already limping, or something that could tip is into a limp without much push required.

- Some things over which we limp are public.
- Some are private.
- Some are things we have done.
- Some are things that have been done to us.
- Some are destructive and evil.
- Some are life-giving and beautiful.
- Some are things that happened long ago and have only recently assumed a role in our life, front and center.
- Some have recently come back into memory.
- Some are things we have never shared with another human being.
- Some are things we have never shared, even with God.

Sometimes when we wrestle with God these things emerge in the course of our wrestling. Sometimes they emerge in our lives and we take them to God and wrestle with the Holy One about them. But wrestling with God, the battle can be tough, we can emerge from the match with a limp, physical or spiritual, a permanent limp, but a limp that is part of being blessed. We are left limping, a holy limp, holy because to be blessed is to incorporate all that has been a part of our lives into our lives, in a way that that even the painful parts – the sources of our limp – can become sources of strength, wisdom, blessing.

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About the time she became United States Poet Laureate, I met Natasha Trethewey briefly at an event. This week she published a book entitled *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*. It is her account of her childhood in Mississippi and Atlanta, her parents' divorce, her mother's remarriage to a man who abused and ultimately murdered her mother when Trethewey was 18.

Thirty-five years later, Trethewey writes:

How then could I not answer [my mother's] life with mine, she who saved me with hers?

How could I not, bathed in the light of her *wound*, find my calling there?

She then quotes Rumi:

The *wound* is the place where the *light* enters you.

In the Christian community, we see that light as the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus Christ.

The wound is the place where the *Spirit* enters.

The light of God's Spirit, God's blessing, entered Jacob, during his long night of wrestling with the night creature.¹⁷

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I am a great fan of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I have seen it a couple of times on Broadway, including in the 1970s when Zero Mostel revived the role of Tevia for the final time in his career. Nearly every time I have seen *Fiddler*, the *Playbill* contains some form of a rendition of the silhouette of a fiddler, on a rooftop, set against the background of a rising sun.

*³¹The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel,
limping because of his hip.*

That's the way I remember Jacob in this story. A silhouette limping, but limping toward the rising sun. A limp to be sure, but a holy limp.

Amen.

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¹⁷ From <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-existential-wound-that-fueled-poet-natasha-tretheweys-acclaimed-career>.