

Wrestling Angels

Genesis 32:22-31

Rev. Emily Peck, Sunday July 31st, 2005
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

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Theologian Friedrich Schlegel wrote that angels are powerful spirits whom God sends into the world to wish us well and that since we don't expect to see them, we don't. It seems he was not talking about the kind of angel that we read about Jacob encountering in the desert. First of all, this spirit didn't necessarily come to wish Jacob well, and second of all, Jacob definitely saw this particular angel. However, Jacob is certainly expecting things of this nature to happen to him; or it's a good guess that he is anyhow.

Jacob has quite a history. In the Jewish recitation of the patriarchs of the tradition, he's right up there—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Number three in the covenantal ancestry. Family legends, whether real or mythical, are ingrained in all of us. Stories seem to grow and change as new generations are born. Jacob's family history is super exciting. His father was a miracle child, born to his past child-bearing age grandparents, both of whom directly heard from God—this is Abraham and Sarah, giving birth to Isaac. His father was almost sacrificed on top of a mountain following a command of God's. With stories like this to tell to their children, I think it's a good bet that Jacob encountering an angel was not a huge shock. There's a lot more to the Jacob story, too.

When we think of people whom God is likely to call to do extraordinary things, we think of people like Gandhi or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr. We think of people we can view as blameless, sinless—better people than we are. This is a misleading expectation. Dare I say it: Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are just as flawed as the rest of us. There are no perfect people. And it doesn't make their work and their passions any less notable. The thing is that God doesn't call perfect people to do important work; God calls real people and through amazing grace persuades us to do the perfect work that is the work of the kingdom of God.

In our passage today from Genesis we meet a very interesting, but very flawed person called to be essential to the faith history of Judaism and Christianity. In the chapters leading up to the one we read from this morning, we meet Jacob and all his flaws. He's almost more faulted than "normal" people—Jacob's story reads like a soap opera. Or at least like the drama on a television reality series. Picture this "character" being introduced for the new season of Survivor: Jacob has two wives, two maids, and eleven children back home, and he's always been busy! He is the younger twin of a feisty pair, full of sibling rivalry since birth. Esau was their father's favorite; Jacob was his mother's, and as such he learned how to cook up a storm in the kitchen, eventually using his culinary gifts to trick his hungry brother out of his birthright.

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Continuing with his conniving, Jacob and his mother Rebecca teamed up to trick Jacob's blind father into thinking he was Esau and getting his father's blessing out of it. Jacob now constantly looks over his shoulder waiting for his older twin brother to seek revenge for all this trickery. Jacob is also a self-made man, having been poor and worked his way into wealth. And he is all set for this season's Survivor, having practiced by wandering in the desert and sleeping out under the stars.

Jacob is quite a character! It's a fair assumption that this colorful history gave Jacob a heightened sense of self-sufficiency and conceit. In reading scholars' interpretations of Jacob, we learn that he was cocksure, aggressive, and certain that whatever the situation, he'd be the one to come out on top. In short, Jacob is a very successful man and is completely intolerable. It is unlikely he'd win on Survivor because no one would want him in their alliance—they'd probably vote him off early because of his attitude. And he's still one of the patriarchs.

From today's passage we hear about a moment of transformation in Jacob's life that altered his character and defined him through and through. Moments like that are rare in life. Like being struck by lightning or like seeing clearly for the first time. Breakthrough moments in therapy; breakthrough moments in your own self-analysis. Moments when you can look around you and notice things that are out of place or need changing in your own life to make it better. These are moments of spring cleaning for the mind, spirit, soul, and heart. Sometimes the moments come like being hit over the head and are very dramatic, as is the case with Jacob. Sometimes these moments slip in, almost undetected, subtly and gently; when you look back and only then realize that such a change has occurred.

I've always experienced the latter, which quite honestly can feel disappointing; it doesn't leave me quite such a good story to tell as would wrestling with an angel and having the limp to prove it. I remember going to a youth conference when I was in high school and a young man stood on stage and said, "I'd like to tell you about how I was into drugs, smoked crack and everything, and in a gang and did all kinds of illegal things until I had an experience with Jesus that totally changed me around. But that wouldn't be true." In his mind, speaking to a crowd of teenagers would have been impressive if his story would have followed a crack addict to saint path. In reality, there are many folks who can much better relate to the subtle story rather than one involving a lightning bolt.

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But let's spend a few minutes with Jacob's lightning bolt story. We know that he is alone in the desert, having forded a stream and left his family (both wives, eleven children, and two maids) on the other side and crossed back over himself. Maybe he just needed some time to think. Maybe he was contemplating his brother who wanted revenge and from whom Jacob wanted acceptance despite their history. Whatever the purpose of Jacob's aloneness, he ends up wrestling with a man all night. As dawn is beginning to come, this man asks Jacob to let him go. The implication here is that whoever or whatever this man is, he's a figure of the night. Jacob refuses to let him go until he blesses him.

First this man reveals something of himself by changing Jacob's name. Jacob becomes Israel because he has "striven with God and with men" and has prevailed. After Jacob wants to know this man's name, he finally gets his blessing. And Jacob renames the place Peniel (which means the face of God). Jacob doesn't get a straight answer. To know someone's name in Hebrew is to have some power over them or some insight into them; this is why the name of God is so hidden. It is represented by the letters YHWH, with the vowels missing, as is usual in Hebrew, but the truth is that no one really knows how to say that name. So Jacob is given a clue about this man, but not his name. For someone who is always certain to win and to get what he wants, this must have been frustrating for Jacob.

The sun rises and Jacob/Israel limps away, injured from the wrestling match. This wrestling match creates a new person in Jacob, and his new name symbolizes the change. Traditionally, this man is considered to be an angel. God does not usually show Godself as a human; angels are sent to say God's words and share commandments with God's people. The Greek word for angel, *angelos*, means messenger. When this man reveals himself by saying that Jacob has striven with God, we take this to mean the man is an angel, but it doesn't really sound like Frederick Buechner's kind of angel. Nor kind of angel we're used to seeing depicted, with glittery wings and a soft countenance.

What this story does for me is open up the notion of an angel. What would it mean to consider things we strive with, struggle with, wrestle with to be messengers of God that can completely change our identity? If Buechner is right and angels do wish us well, then this is a little complicated. We now have to think of a powerful spirit who can wrestle us into new beings while wishing us well. Sounds like some pretty tough love. The truth, however, is that a lot about life is tough.

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I think of children—remember when Elsa asked our children what secrets they knew about God? One boy answered that God will keep him safe no matter what. In our world, in our city, it seems impossible to shelter our children. Yet, when reality is inescapable, children still know what we often forget—that God takes care of us.

When I was thinking about things I wrestle with, two huge topics came to mind: poverty and racism. These topics are so huge, I don't think that any sermon—no matter how long—could possibly address them in a satisfying way. Not to mention that my night of wrestling with angels bearing these messages isn't over. I'm still wrestling and because this night is so long, I can feel myself changing as the wrestling continues.

I grew up in a place where I heard the "n word" used fairly often, where I thought every black person was an African American (I had never heard of the West Indies), where I had also never heard of the words "people of color." Because I didn't use the "n word" and because I had people of color in my sorority I wasn't a racist and didn't really have to think about it too much. Then I learned about systemic racism and I found out about the term "white privilege," meaning that it's easier for me to get the attention of a salesperson in a store or get a cab or get a job or get respect than it is for a person of color.

I learned about unequal education and economic discrepancies. I learned that I do play a part in these systems even if I don't use offensive language. For us, how do we balance our need for safety with the very real concern of racial profiling? I also learned about poverty in a new way. I learned about worldwide poverty and worker exploitation. I learned about overseas outsourcing and loss of jobs here. I learned about landlords and rent inflation. I see homeless people every day. Not a homeless person like I may have seen once a year in my small town.

And you know what else? The reason I know that these wrestling matches aren't over is because I am still learning. Every day. More and more. Some days it's completely overwhelming. Some days I want to walk away and let the angel go instead of holding on like Jacob does. Some days I know that I will limp when this is over. My horizons have been broadened by the angels who wrestle with me; it's frightening and it's painful. But it's necessary and there is a blessing in it. The lack of satisfactory answers to these wrestling matches is often frustrating and scary. It is often why I wish the match would end. But it also proves how important it is that the wrestling continue.

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I included a drawing of Jacob wrestling with the angel in our bulletins. When I was looking for some representation of this biblical scene, I had a plethora of hits. I liked this one because it looks so real. I can almost hear Jacob grunting. I can see their muscles flexing and imagine sweat beading on their shoulders. This is a raw drawing that captures the way this passage feels for me. I encourage you to look at it, too, and to think about angels you are wrestling. What messages from God are changing you from the inside? I've mentioned the two messages that I am wrestling with most; what are yours? Frightening, painful wrestling. Wrestling that's necessary and where there is a blessing.

What's in a name? A lot. Jacob does not get to know the angel's name because it would give Jacob some power over him. But Jacob gets a new name. Jacob is completely defined by this angel; he is now Israel, who has striven with God and with men.

God is concerned with us. To wrestle with God's messenger and messages is to wrestle with God's beloved people. For me, wrestling with the angel bearing messages of racism is to wrestle with my understanding of people of color in this country and elsewhere. It is to wrestle with my understanding of myself as a white person and what privileges that includes, privileges that oppress others. For me, wrestling with the angel bearing messages of poverty is to wrestle with my understanding of wealth and economic achievement. It is to wrestle with my understanding of homeless folks, and of un- and under-employed folks.

God is wrestling with me. God is wrestling with all of us. Regardless of how tough this love is, how difficult the messages are to hear, how much of a limp we are left with at the end of the night, the new day holds new possibilities for us to be who God calls us to be. This is the blessing of the new day.

The blessing for Jacob was equally as intense. The injured Jacob is better than the self-assured, aggressive Jacob. He is completely humbled by the control God has over him. Through wrestling with God's angel, Jacob's defects are revealed, and he is left with a limp. He is no longer perfect. He didn't win against the angel. He didn't get the name of the angel, and his whole identity has changed. And as the sun rose on Jacob as he left Penuil, the sun also rose in Jacob himself. He is now ready to seek forgiveness from Esau and admit his own wrongs; he is ready to accept his new physical infirmity. A new day has dawned and a new Jacob walks into the morning.

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In looking at this picture, I can tell the outcome of this wrestling match will be remarkable. This is no normal wrestling match; it is a supernatural struggle. A chosen man striving with God and with men to change himself for the betterment of his relationships. And for us, we are people striving with God and with humankind; this struggle will also change us, for the betterment of our relationships. This is God's tough love of difficult messages with a notable, extra-ordinary, remarkable outcome and we experience it along with Jacob. Along with Jacob, it will change our entire identity.