

Genesis 32:22-32 (*The Five Books of Moses*, Robert Alter)

And he rose on that night and took his two wives and his two slavegirls and his eleven boys and he crossed over the Jabbok ford. And he took them and brought them across the stream, and he brought across all that he had. And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. And he saw that he had not won out against him and he touched his hip-socket and Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. And he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out." And Jacob asked and said, "Tell your name, pray." And he said, "Why should you ask my name?" and there he blessed him. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God face to face and I came out alive." And the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his hip. Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh which is by the hip-socket to this day, for he had touched Jacob's hip-socket at the sinew of the thigh.¹

¹ Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, n.d.

Wrestling in the Night

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 8, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 32:22-32

This morning we enter a narrative that takes us into the deep parts of the human soul. In this story we hear echoes of tales even more ancient than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Today's text stirs with murky prehistory even as it moves our saga into the next chapter of Israel's history in the Promised Land.

Jacob, the heel grabber, the stealer, the cheater, the crooked—his name suggests all these—Jacob the crooked 20 years ago fled for his life from the wrath of his brother Esau. He fled north to Padan Aram, the old family homeland, there to find safety. There, in the company of his uncle Laban's family, Jacob also began his own family. When we last saw him, Jacob had just outwitted his uncle. Under impossible rules set by Laban Jacob was nonetheless able to build large and healthy herds. He was ready to go back home to the land that God had promised to Abraham and his heirs.

But as we learned last time, Laban was reluctant to let Jacob go. Jacob was an expert herdsman, and Laban's wealth grew largely because of Jacob. Jacob was too useful to let go. So, after we last saw him, Jacob decided to gather up his family and belongings and sneak out of town. In stories we are skipping, Jacob flees, Laban catches up with him, they quarrel, they finally cut an agreement, and Jacob and his entourage go on their way.

But with one trouble behind him, Jacob must now turn his attention to an even greater danger ahead of him. If Jacob is to return to the Promised Land, he must encounter Esau, who has sworn to kill him. In verses we are skipping, Jacob and Esau approach each other, Jacob from the north, Esau from the south. [slide 1] A worried Jacob devises several damage control strategies. Among them, he divides his family and belongings into smaller groups, hoping that one might survive Esau's onslaught. He also sends extravagant presents to appease Esau.

But now the moment of truth arrives. Jacob has done all he can. He knows that Esau awaits him with a large armed force. This moment is pregnant with tension and import. There is the danger of meeting his estranged brother. But there is also a boundary Jacob must cross that is both geographical and theological in its meaning. We find Jacob on the east side of the Jordan River, near where the Jabbok River joins it. [slide 2] He will now need to turn westerly and cross the Jabbok and then the Jordan if he is to enter the Promised Land. [slide 3]. Note the boundary of the Promised Land or Canaan on the slide. Jacob is in the borderland. He is at the portal. But before he can pass, he must meet Esau coming up from the south. To gain entry into the Promised Land Jacob must deal with Esau and the river crossings. [end slides]

As the sun sets and nightfall arrives Jacob sends everyone else across the Jabbok. He is alone with himself on the banks of the river. Like all humans, it is in nights of great portent that Jacob meets his demons. As if to emphasize old demonic roots we hear echoes in the story of ancient folktales and river spirits. In the folktales the danger of river crossings was often represented by some sort of demon or spirit, like the stories of trolls at the bridge. This night at the river's edge a man wrestles with Jacob until he insists on leaving at the coming dawn. Folk spirits must disappear before daylight. Folktale motifs are buried in the primordial stuff of

human psychology, and they are roused in Jacob this night. But Jacob is also a man of the God of Israel, and whoever Jacob's opponent is, and we never really know, this story transcends the confines of river dervishes. This night Jacob fights on the stage of family and nation, of the God of Israel and God's chosen people, of failure and possibility.

This wrestling match remains one of the most recognized yet enigmatic stories in the Bible. Who was Jacob's opponent? Was it the dream-induced ghost of Esau? Was it a heavenly host of angels or godlike beings from heaven's realms? Was it God himself? This last seems least likely to most interpreters, who are bothered that Jacob could wrestle God to a tie. But then others think that Jacob is now to be called Israel because the name means he has wrestled God and humans and won out. "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out." But then again the Hebrew, Yisrael, actually seems more likely to mean that God fights and prevails, so that's confusing.

The later rabbis have yielded an interesting take on the story. They note that the stem of the Hebrew word Israel means upright or righteous. No matter the exact details of the wrestling match or the opponent, then, what we have, they say, is the change of Jacob's name from heel-grabber, supplanter and cheater to Israel, that is, to he who is upright or righteous with God. We have a man who has been made new, who will now mostly leave the crooked life of deceit and manipulation behind. But as we will see Jacob does not become suddenly straightforward and upright, nor is his life to be without grief and hardship. And even in this story he hangs onto his opponent until it gives him a blessing. Jacob may not have changed all that much. It's all very confusing. As the title of a famous 14th century mystical text says, we find ourselves in a cloud of unknowing. The exact contours of that night wrestling match on the shore of the Jabbok River are shrouded in mystery.

James Michener's novel *The Source* is an account of a small town in upper Israel. Through the little town of Makor Michener intends, though, to tell the story of Israel. As was Michener's custom, the novel sweeps from prehistory to contemporary times. In one section, some 500 years later than the story of Jacob, God is trying to convince the old man Zadok to attack the town of Makor. Zadok is reluctant, and God, here called by one of his many names in the Old Testament, El Shaddai, God almighty, says, "Are you still afraid of war, Zadok?"

"Yes. When I was a boy and we were besieging Timri ..."

"I remember Timri." [interrupts El Shaddai]

[Zadok continues] "You ordered my father Zebul to destroy the town for its abominations, and he forced me to stand beside him as he slaughtered men and women and children. And my ankles were red with blood. And I got sick and wanted never to see a spear again. And I hated you, El-Shaddai, for you were cruel."

"I remember that night," the god said. "You were seven years old, and you cursed me, and was it not then that I spoke to you for the first time? ..." On the morrow of Timri when your father was sleeping near the serpent that would have bitten him?"

Zadok recalled that remote midday, fifty-seven years ago, when he had first spoken with his god, and not once in the intervening years had it occurred to him that El-Shaddai had chosen him that day precisely because of his opposition the night before to the massacre of Timri. El-Shaddai could have elected older men and wiser as his voice, but he had chosen the child Zadok

because even as a boy of seven he had been willing to judge the questions of mercy and humanity with his own conscience.²

In short, God came to the conclusion that it would be best if the people he chose, both individually and as a nation, were a mixed bag, if they were compassionate, peaceful, courageous, but willful and stiff-necked; ethical, thoughtful, confident, and argumentative; deferent, reverent, but scheming and tricky all rolled into one. El Shaddai intentionally chose this uneasy conjunction of character traits, which he knew would lead to a complex and troubled relationship between the people and the divine.

El Shaddai came to the conclusion, one might say, that the desire to be like God that Adam and Eve evidenced in the garden or that the nations manifested at the Tower of Babel, were, after all, traits required of God's chosen people. They would need a moral compass, a courageous heart, a reverent and deferent faith, but also a willful bent, a stiff-neck and argumentative ways if they were to grapple with God and man. Yet these very traits, El Shaddai knew, would combine in ways that would often contradict one another, would often cause trouble and take the people on detours. El Shaddai would need patience and boundless love in guiding this people.

I often think we and God haven't changed all that much in these basic characteristics since the 15th century B.C.E. We struggle to tame or juggle this set of human contradictions and out of them construct a meaningful way of life and an ongoing relationship, or maybe better said, a wrestling match with God.

The Gods who came before El Shaddai—Baal, Dagon, Malek—never had such relationships with the people. As physical as they were in the golden calf or stone pillars, they did not relate to the people. But the God of Israel, whose being transcended all things and who was contained by no object, ironically talked and argued with his people. He cajoled and loved and rebuked and forgave them.

As dawn broke on the banks of the Jabbok that morning long ago, Jacob got up with a limp—a sign that being in relationship with God takes its toll. He went to meet his estranged brother Esau and then to return home, to the Promised Land, after two full decades after fleeing for his life. Is Jacob a changed man? Of course he is. Is he a better man? I think he probably is. A relationship with God bends the arc of one's life for the better, to be sure. Was he now a perfect man? No. As Paul would say of himself many centuries later, Jacob still had that human propensity to fail to do what he ought to do and to do what he ought not to do. But through it all he and the following generations would go down into Egypt, cross the sea in front of Pharaoh's pursuing forces, and cross the Jordan into the Promised Land very near the place where Jacob crossed today.

It is a circle of sorts. And like all circles it cycles again and again. Generation after generation the people walk and seek. Sometimes they say there is a goal, like the Promised Land. But it never turns out how they think it will, and it's never an endpoint. Sometimes they come closer to the truth and recognize that it is in those sometimes painful, sometimes exhilarating conversations and wrestling matches with God, those places where they see God face to face, that they glimpse what Jesus liked to call the Kingdom of God. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

² Michener, James A. (2009-09-30). *The Source: A Novel* (Kindle Locations 3253-3262). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.