

A Lectionary 18 8.6.23

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

Focus Statement: God is with us in the wrestling, and when we cannot wrestle anymore.

It's been a couple of weeks, let's catch up on what our buddy Jacob's been up to. Two weeks ago, Pastor Ed talked about how God came to Jacob in a dream and confirmed on him all the promises Isaac had made in his blessing, all the promises God had first given to Abraham.

Last week you heard how the trickster got tricked, as Jacob worked out a deal with Laban to work seven years to earn the hand of Laban's daughter Rachel. But when the day of marriage arrived, Laban took advantage of the custom of wedding veils and a raging wedding party to instead marry Jacob to Rachel's older sister Leah, and Jacob would need to work an additional seven years for Rachel.

Jacob may have been tricked briefly and ended up with two wives, plus two handmaids, but Jacob being Jacob, he got the last laugh at the end. In the intervening chapters between that story and this one, Jacob had tended his father-in-law's flocks with great care and attention, and he had also negotiated a deal that ended with him taking possession of the best and strongest of that flock when he set out on his own. Which is where we find him today.

Setting out on his own, with his wives, and maids, and eleven sons—eventually twelve, Benjamin hasn't been born yet—and at least one daughter, along with servants, flocks, and untold other wealth. Jacob has done well for himself. But, as has been the case for Jacob, his prosperity has come at the cost of relationship. When we meet Jacob this morning, like he was when God came to him in a dream, Jacob is on the run. Laban caught on to the fact that he was being duped by his son-in-law, and the move to set out on his own was not entirely Jacob's choice. He's on the run again. Only before when he was on the run, he was

fleeing Esau to an unknown future. Now, fleeing Laban, Jacob was running back to Esau and an uncertain return. He had no idea how his once tricked brother would receive him.

Would the welcome be warm after all this time, and the gifts Jacob had sent ahead of him to sweeten the homecoming? Or was Esau still, understandably, mad after all this time?

This is where we encountered Jacob this morning. Having sent his family across the river ahead of him, Jacob sat at the ford of the Jabbok, with an angry father-in-law behind and maybe an angry brother ahead, alone, with no one to call if danger came. And at some point in the night, danger did. An unknown man appeared and wrestled Jacob until daybreak. The text doesn't make clear if Jacob knew he was wrestling God until the end. Maybe he knew all along, maybe he thought it was Esau, or a warrior of Esau's or Laban's, or just a run of the mill burglar. Whoever Jacob thought it was, Jacob met this unseen foe and wrestled him to a draw. Even when the man saw he couldn't win outright and cheated, throwing Jacob's hip out of socket, still Jacob prevailed, refusing to let go until God blessed him.

And bless him God did, saying, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Just as God sealed God's promise to Abraham with a new name, so too God sealed God's promise to Jacob. But with one interesting difference. When Abram became Abraham, the old name was gone. With Jacob, now Israel, the names remain interchangeable. Jacob the deceiver is still Israel the striver, and visa versa. Being blessed by God did not fundamentally change Jacob. He remained Jacob even as he was Israel, because he had always been Israel, this blessing just making

clear what had always been true, Jacob/Israel was one who did not give up. Who was not afraid to wrestle and struggle and hang onto what he wanted, what he needed. Even with God, Jacob would prevail.

This story is a powerful lesson for us in what God can take. It reminds us that wrestling with God, struggling against God, refusing to let up until we have been blessed is a good and worthy way of interacting with the almighty. In Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok we encounter a God who wants to struggle with us, who will make Godself small enough to be a worthy opponent, has created us as large enough to hold our own. Ours is a God who can handle, will even invite, action, challenge, disagreement and struggle, who is big enough to hold our thoughts, our fights, our frustration. If Jacob isn't enough proof for you, read the psalms. God can hold whatever you have to bring the table, God is big enough for your anger, ready for your questions, eager to embrace your striving, and will bless you in the effort.

God can, will, and even wants to engage us in struggle is good news, dear people, on the days when we have the energy to engage it. But what about the times when we do not? What about the days when struggle is the last thing on our minds, when we are tired and worn down by the weight of the work and the worry. For those days, there is our Gospel. We jump into the middle of chapter fourteen. Immediately before it, the event that caused Jesus to withdraw from the crowd, was the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus, we know from previous texts, liked and respected John and John's followers, and he and his disciples were certainly feeling this loss, and the fear that accompanied it. If John, whom Herod liked and thought of as a prophet, was not safe, how soon might a similar end be coming for

them? So Jesus withdrew from the crowd to mourn. But, being Jesus, when the people followed after and he saw their need, he could not help but care for them. To the point where, when evening came, he wanted to feed them. Which was a step too far for the disciples. Jesus, you can hear them saying, they can feed themselves. There's nothing wrong with them other than we're in a field in the middle of nowhere. They can go find their own food, we barely have enough food for us. We have solved no end of problems already for them, and we have so many of our own. Don't make us feed them as well.

I love how Jesus responded here. He didn't chide them in their exhaustion, tell them to suck it up, get their acts together, and figure out a solution. But neither did he leave them out. Jesus sat the crowd down, gave the bread to the disciples, and had them distribute what they had. And in the disciples' own hands became a miracle of abundance, fish and bread enough to share, so that twelve baskets of leftovers remained. You have enough, you are enough, Jesus showed the disciples. Even when you are tired, even when you don't feel like it, even when you can't see it, who you are, what you are, what you have, in the hands of Jesus, is more than enough.

Dear people of God, these readings today show us a God who is big enough to hold our challenges, and soft enough to walk alongside. Who will in equal parts shape and shelter. Who wants to hold our questions and comfort our fears. Who, in the words of the psalmist from a few weeks ago, searches us and knows us, our coming out and our going in. Who shaped us and formed us, and continues to do so, no matter what we bring. Thanks be to God. Amen.