

**Wrestling With God**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**September 22, 2019**

*Genesis 32: 9-13, 22-30*

Jacob was a young man on the run. Earlier that same day, he had stolen something precious... the blessing his father Isaac meant to give to his older twin brother Esau.

The blessing, though it was only mere words, meant power, status, control, all the things Jacob so desperately desired. But in tricking his father into giving it to him, he had caused a seismic rift in his family.

Esau, for his part, vowed to kill him, and he believed the vow, so he ran.

From the very beginning, Esau had been first. Growing up, all Jacob could see about his older twin was his physical strength, his vitality, his prominence. The smaller boy constructed his very identity in reference to his twin – striving to be his opposite, to be different. Maybe then he would become his father’s favorite.

But that was not to be, and now, Jacob was alone. Since it was getting late out there in the wilderness, he took a stone and placed it like a pillow, wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and laid down on the cold, rocky ground. It wasn’t the most comfortable way to sleep, but at least his neck wouldn’t cramp up (or at least, he hoped).

It’s been said that “*dreaming men are haunted men*<sup>1</sup>”, and Jacob was no exception. Fitfully, he dreamed of a ladder that stretched from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it. Suddenly, someone who looked a whole lot like God stood right in front of him, promising that he’d never be alone, that he’d be granted land on which to raise a nation of people.

When Jacob awoke, he was shook. Surely, this was a holy place. He took the stones on which he had slept and made a pillar to mark the spot so that someday he could return.

\*\*\*\*\*

20 years passed and Jacob was an older, hopefully wiser man. He wondered if enough time had passed. Would it be safe to return to the land of his

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, John Brown's Body

father? If he did, this would mean he'd have to face his brother Esau for the first time since he had tricked him out of his blessing 2 decades ago.

On the way, he heard his brother Esau was coming to meet him with 400 fighting men. Perhaps his hope of forgiveness and reunification was foolish after all.

So he prayed...

He prayed that his brother wouldn't completely destroy him and take all of his worldly possessions.

He prayed that Esau's men wouldn't take away his wives, daughters and maidservants as restitution for his theft of long ago.

He prayed that no harm would come to his sons, if a fight did indeed break out.

Exhausted and full of dread, he sent those he loved to the other side of the river, as far away from the fight as possible.

And just like that night in the wilderness 20 years ago, once again, Jacob was alone.

Or was he? We're told that a stranger appears in the dark, wanting to wrestle. Which seems like a really strange thing to do.

Unless you think about what we wrestle in the dark of the night, the fears and anxieties that grip our hearts.

The two wrestle all night long, and at the break of day, Jacob's adversary wrenches his hip right from its socket.

And he gives him a blessing. And a new identity as "one who strives". Jacob limped forever after that night. As the sun rose, he looked up and saw his brother coming towards him, not with a sword of war but with a kiss. And the brothers wept, for all the time they had lost and all that was now restored.

\*\*\*\*\*

What makes this story so incredibly engaging?

Maybe we're inspired because this is the first real character we encounter in Genesis. Let's face it, everyone else up until now are presented kind of flat. They pretty much do what God tells them to do. Sure, they may protest a little here and there, but otherwise they are objects.

Jacob seems like the first person we've encountered with more than one dimension.

As a young man he deceived his blind father, stole a blessing from his brother, and literally had to escape with his life. We expect that would have been a turning point, maybe he'll have learned something from the experience.

And then as a middle-aged man he wants to return to his family, but he's afraid. He engages in this great wrestling match with a mysterious stranger over a long dark night of the soul. Maybe now, after all of this striving, Jacob will change. Indeed, his name does!

But once he finally faces Esau, after their tender reunion, he continues to lie to him again and again! He lies about where he's going. He tells him his children are a little frail, and if they keep pushing on, all the cattle will die.

Nothing about Jacob changes. In a way, that's kind of depressing. His habits remain the same. He is, simply put, who he is and who he will continue to be.

I think that it's interesting that we get to consider this story on a day when we dedicate our next confirmation class (and not just because it's a twin story, Kate and Carrie!). This year is going to be all about wrestling for you, considering big questions and starting to find your place in the world.

In the beginning, Jacob's spirituality is all external. It's all verbal, maybe even put on for show. He believes that if he says the right thing at the right time, life will go great for him. Jacob tricks his father into saying the right words of blessing, believing it's enough. But it's not. It never is.

He tries to bargain with God with what some call a 'foxhole faith'. "Lord, I'm in trouble", he says, "*Get me out of this mess. Help me out here!*"

And by the time he enters into this wrestling match, he believes he's done everything he knows how to do, he's as clever as he knows how to be.

Ironically, it's only when Jacob admits his own vulnerability that things begin to go better for him!

On that night at the Jabbok River, before encountering his long-lost brother, Jacob admits, "*I am afraid*". He doesn't know what to do, and all he has to rely on is what he remembers of God's promise long ago.

Have you ever had the experience of encountering someone who has been an adversary, with whom your relationship was broken, and absolutely being gripped by fear?

One of the realities of a broken relationship is that if there's no move to healing, if what you do is run away from it, then that moment gets frozen in time and perhaps even amplified. We get stuck.

So, Jacob's had 20 years to replay that fight with his brother in his head. 20 years to remember fleeing as a fugitive, 20 years to wonder "*what if I had done things differently?*"

Jacob is just like us. And we've got to be honest about his many weaknesses, because if we believe that God should only work with people who are perfect, then we are doomed.

But God doesn't work only with perfect people. And the fact that God works with this person Jacob, with all of his deceit and selfishness, with all of his conflicting pushes and drives and struggles – that, to me is a sign of hope.

Sometimes, an experience like that is enough to bring you to your knees. When we encounter God, when we wrestle with God, we are not going to leave unchanged.

This encounter has meant pain for Jacob, the pain, really, of struggling with God, of experiencing God as the adversary. We often talk about God as a parent, a protector and so on, but what about God the antagonist?

There is a long biblical tradition, in the book of Job and other places, of God taking on an adversarial relationship – in order to push us out of complacency. And the great mystery is that even this pushy God continues to love the one whom is being pushed.

Jewish Midrash says — that Jacob demands the blessing because he has been injured. There is a connection between the pain and the suffering and the moral right to ask for a blessing.

You don't get the blessing without getting wounded, and even God's unconditional love for Jacob winds up costing him something physically.

When you came to church this morning, what did you expect? Did you seek stillness and solitude? Did you hope to sing? Did you want an inspiring story, a pep talk to lift your spirits after a difficult week?

Or did you expect God to interrupt your story, to pin you to the ground and hold you fast, to expose your wounded, limping spirit, to rename you and claim you?

We all wonder about our callings, our gifts, our growth in this place we call church. But whether we barely know each another, or have been best friends for years, the truth is we have more in common than what divides us.

We're all just finding our way home, and all of us get a little wounded on the way.

So, I hope that we can consider this place our little Jabbok, the water that marks out a frontier where we flee from danger to refuge. Because even though it is bright outside, our hearts are familiar with the shadows, the inky darkness that longs for a new dawn.

And into this space, God sends someone to interrupt us and never let us go, not when we're ready but because we are unworthy. And this is no stranger but Christ Jesus, who bears our wounds with us and then blesses us with his own lasting life.

To meet God here, in this way, to receive a blessing, is not because of our individual strength or achievements. God knows our deepest wounds and names us beloved in spite of them.

And so, Jacob's story becomes our own, a word of hope to share beyond this space in every place of danger and darkness. And such a story doesn't really end. Instead, in ways that could still surprise us, it's only just begun. Amen.