

Eastern Region Sermon – 02 August 2020

'God wrestles with us to change us'

A long, long time ago, there lived a man named Jacob. Now Jacob was not a particularly nice person. He had managed to deceive his father into giving him a very special blessing which would have included the promise of all the silver and gold, the servants, the flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle; the camels, donkeys, everything that should have gone to his older brother Esau. Jacob was a schemer and a cheat and he did all he could to get his own way.

You can imagine, Esau was not happy about this at all! They ended up living a long way apart and they did not see one another for many, many years. But Jacob eventually wanted to meet with his brother again - perhaps he wanted to put things right between them. So, with all his family and possessions, he began the long journey to meet Esau - imagine how he felt when he heard that Esau was coming to meet him and he had 400 men with him!

Jacob thought that Esau was planning to kill him and his family - so he camped one day beside a river and sent lots of gifts ahead to his brother, then he sent all of his family and his flocks and herds across to the other side but he stayed where he was as night fall - all alone - or so he thought....for Jacob found himself wrestling with someone all night.

It was terrible for Jacob, he didn't know who he was wrestling with and it was clear that this stranger meant business. This was a serious wrestling match. It was dark and everything was in shadows. Was Esau slipping up on him early? Was it a night spirit, a ghost, prowling in the darkness; a demon that lived there in the middle of nowhere? Was Jacob wrestling with himself, struggling with his own demons? Or was it an angel, or even the God who had been haunting him all his life?

They struggle until just before morning when it looks for a moment as though Jacob would win. The stranger called out to Jacob to let him go. Then suddenly everything is reversed when he knocked Jacob's hip out of socket. Jacob was crippled, defeated, and helpless, by a mere touch on the hip. But he held on for dear life, and cried: "I will not let you go, I will not let you go unless you bless me."

What was is it that Jacob wanted more than anything else in life? What is it that we, in the deepest longings of our being, want more than anything else in life? Sometimes we don't even know how to put our longings into words. But the word for Jacob was the word "blessing". I want to know the smile of God. I want to know the favor of God. I want to know that what I am doing with my life is pleasing to the one who made me. I want to see that my life has purpose and significance. Bless me!

We are faced with so many challenges in our life, and we often struggle to name them or understand them. But whatever the situation we may face in life we all seem to have a need to be blessed. Unfortunately, the way we go about it often hurtful to others and to ourselves. We can be like Jacob, who sought to get the blessing all through his life in a way that led to brokenness. He had been competitive. He had been the one who had sought to win at all costs. He had tried to get the blessing by cheating and by trickery, and all this only ended with a broken family and him fleeing for his life. And now he was all alone battling this stranger in the night.

So Jacob held on to the stranger for dear life, and would not let him go until he had received a blessing. The stranger, clearly in control now, didn't give the blessing, at least not straight away. Instead he asks, "What's your name?" Jacob tells the truth, he answers 'it's Jacob'. Yes, he tells the truth this time! He doesn't lie, as he did to his father, to trick him into giving him a blessing instead of his older twin brother. He says, 'My name is Jacob' (which means, 'the heel grabber' or 'supplanter'). Yep, that's me; that's who I am. My name is 'grabby'. It is as if God holds a mirror up before Jacob who finally sees himself as

he really is. The stranger replies, *"You are no longer Jacob. You are Israel—the one who wrestles with God."*

Jacob is given a new name. His new name, 'Israel' means "one who strives with God" or "God strives". So Jacob has been reborn and renamed. Jacob, now called, 'Israel' is the one who has faced God, been gripped by God, and struggled with God, and survived. Jacob then asked this stranger for his name. He doesn't receive it, but instead he receives the blessing that he originally wanted, and then declares, *'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'*

The story ends with this brief aside, "and Jacob limped from then on." Wrestling with God is serious business and you can't expect to escape unscathed, in one way or the other. If we continue on reading past today's reading, we find that his wrestling with God has changed Jacob in more ways than him being given a new name and a limp.

Significantly, it is only after wrestling the opponent that Jacob is prepared to face his brother. Exhausted by his night of struggle and injured by his opponent, he lifts his eyes to see Esau coming in the distance with the 400 men. Only this time, Jacob goes ahead of his children and wives to face his brother rather than sending them ahead first! No more hiding behind someone's skirt or looking for an angle. Jacob bows to the ground seven times in front of his brother, then Esau runs to meet him, and embraces him, and kissed him, and they weep. Interestingly, Jacob said to Esau, *'To see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour.'*

This story about Jacob wrestling with God is an intriguing one. I can't help but wonder, 'Who was Jacob really fighting that night?' Was it just a man, who Jacob sees as some kind of messenger from God? Was it an angel? Was Jacob really just wrestling with himself, with his inner demons? Was this his dark night of the soul? We don't really need to know the exact answer to the question. That is one of the beauties of many of the stories in the Bible, there are so many layers of meaning. But one thing is clear, somehow God wrestled with Jacob and blessed him: God wrestled with Jacob and changed him.

We aren't formed by success and a trouble-free existence. We are molded by our struggles. Sooner or later every one of us wrestles with the Eternal Stranger who will not let us go. We never know when things will take a turn and suddenly we'll be face to face with our deepest fears and darkest doubts. At such moments we need to know how to struggle until morning, how to hold on to grace. And one thing we can be fairly certain of: if we have such a struggle and, like Jacob, survive through that dark night, we will be blessed. But we may also be wounded.

Jacob had the blessing from his father, the one obtained by deceit, but now he had the blessing of God, the one that really mattered, but he only received it after he had been wounded. As strange as it may first sound, the one who wounded Jacob was God. If we want to live deeply, then we may end up limping, but I suspect that the people who know the blessing of God are the ones who struggle with God. Think of the many examples of faithful people in scripture: think of the many prophets, and how they wrestled with God, challenged God to do what they thought correct. Or think of the Apostle Paul – he struggled with God, and even persecuted Christians at first, until he met Christ on the road to Damascus. For a while he was blind and throughout his life carried what he called, 'a thorn in the flesh'. We don't know what it was, but he had it for the rest of his known life.

Sometimes our encounters with God are painful, but in that pain, we are finding our way to the hope beyond the questions, we are becoming God's people. May God bless each of us on our journey of faith, even if that sometimes involves pain. May each of us be transformed by our encounter with God, so that we might better live the life to which we are called. May we truly love God and our neighbour. Amen.