

Wrestling with God: Broken and Blessed

Genesis 32:22-32; Hebrews 4:12-16

Focus: Our central activity as a congregation can/must be wrestling with scripture, by which God subdues and blesses us.

Genesis 32

The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

***Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.***

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then [the stranger] said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but [now] Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?"

And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Hebrews 4

... the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

[But,] since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Sermon

Jacob is a **scoundrel**.

And Jacob is my **hero**.

I figure that if a conniving
grasping
lying
cheating
stealing
son of gun

can wrestle with God all night long
and survive the tussle, **blessed and remade**

than I figure there must be hope for us all –

scoundrels-becoming-saints that we all are

Jacob is the Old Testament's most unlikely holy father

Anyone whose name in Hebrew means, lit. "one who grasps"
 "cheater, supplanter"

is not someone you'd expect
 to be in the running for **patriarch of the year**

Jacob is a **grasper**.

He oozes into situations like spilled oil,
 and cheats his way into what he wants.

It was said of the infant Jacob that he came out of his mother's
 womb **grasping the heel** of his slightly older twin Esau

Later he and his mother would conspire to trick his aged father
 Isaac out of the birthright ordinarily due Esau

His brother was so enraged that their mother had to arrange
 for Jacob to flee to her ancestral home in order to be safe

Many years later, by the time of ch. 32 in Genesis

with decades of **anger** and **resentment** between them

Jacob finds himself on the cusp of reuniting with Esau

And he's **understandably anxious**:

years of grasping are catching up with him

He does not know how Esau will respond ...

And so in a pinch the **Great Grasper** does what graspers do:
 he tries to **manipulate** the situation
 he sends his wives, maids, children, stuff
 across the river toward Esau
 hoping to grease the way ...

This is the problem with our **perpetual attempts**
 to secure our lives/status/place by our own devices:

innocent bystanders get swept up in our schemes

Meanwhile, we continue to delude ourselves with the notion
 that our old sins and schemes will always see us through

So there's old Jacob—the **grand grasper**, the **courageous cheat**

Alone in the night

with only the **chirping crickets**
 along the banks of the Jabbok

to keep him company

Having sent ahead of him all he owns,
 he no longer has an **insulating buffer**

For perhaps the first time in his life,
 he has run of plans for securing himself

and then it happens

From behind, seemingly out of nowhere

Jacob is seized upon and thrown to ground

What's this? Someone has grasped the grasper?

It is mysterious stranger:

Is it a passing hoodlum, a random robber?

It is one of his servants, come back to enact revenge ...

It must be Esau, come to pound on him with decades of anger

Is it an angel? some manifestation of his father's God?

Jacob does not know.

And besides, there is little time for speculation
when someone has your head in a **Modified Dragon Sleeper ...**

*That's a wrestling move, by the way.
When I can't sleep I watch a lot of WWF*

All night long the wrestle → the sinner and the stranger

Finally the stranger recognizes he has been bested

(Maybe even he underestimated the grasper's tenacity)

"Let me go" → as he puts Jacob's hip out of socket

Jacob: foolishly committed to a good scuffle:

"I will not let you go. Not until you bless me."

What is your name?

Grasper

No longer will you be called Grasper

From now on you will be called "he strives with God"—"Israel"

Who actually **wins** this altercation is hard precisely to say

But for the first time in his life, Jacob's grasping is **subdued**

He is a new man: **broken, but blessed.**

For some time now

Jacob's wrestling with this stranger
Jacob-the-grasper becoming Jacob-the-blessed
the image of Israel's patriarch—

headed off into history with a **limp** and a **new name**

For some time now this passage has functioned

as a kind of **living metaphor** for what it feels like
to engage scripture as the living word of God

Based on the **paltry submissions** that frequent our Presbyterian pulpits in this era, it must be that for many a preacher, the Bible is a limp, lifeless thing

a long-dead repository of soft, helpful quotations
and sermon starters that are sure not to offend

But I can testify that it is not so for me → and that this is no statement about the virtue of the preacher

rather it is a recognition that these words around which we gather ever Sunday morning **have a life of their own**

Brooded over as they are by a **vivifying Holy Spirit** ...
Bearing witness as they do to the **scandal** of Christ Jesus ...
Bringing forth the **electric history** of God's electing grace

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow

Now there's a **Precious Moment** figurine I'd like to see.

Rarely has there been a week in my **preacherly labors**

when scripture has not assaulted me
like the stranger assaults our father Jacob

This is not a time for soft sentiments; religious musing
This is not an effort in lowest-common-denominator speeches
so as not to offend
This is not 20 minutes of weekly confirmation of what we
already believe and affirm on our own

This is a wrestling match, Presbyterians

We should come with helmets and padding
We should put those bouncy ropes around the perimeter
We should wear brightly-colored spandex

This time together, gathered around the Word

it is a regularly-scheduled **Sunday morning struggle**

between the **scoundrels we are**
and the saints God in Christ is making us to be

a weekly struggle, between the **broken lives** we bring
to the Lord and the blessing God is willing to pour out

Now maybe you're saying to yourself

Hey preacher, calling us scoundrels, speak for yourself

Oh, I am. Speaking for myself. A **scoundrel**.

A child of God, raised up in faith,
knowing the name of Jesus for as long as I can remember

still I grasp at **people/places/possessions** that cannot save

still I think I can **secure my life** by my own striving efforts

I am Jacob: a cheating covenant child
Ever in need of being subdued and being saved

*So, you see, I'm invested in knowing
how one survives a scuffle with scripture*

I want to know how a cheater tangles with Christ
and comes out alive on the other end

I'm on a search

for a way of engaging this living witness,
week by week, Sunday by Sunday,

such that we will together find ourselves

subdued by the challenging words/way of JC

and **saved** by his always-unmerited grace

I'm taking notes from Jacob, about what its like to wrestle w God

I note that Jacob wrestles with the stranger all night long

and that suggests to me that we should not expect this journey of faith to be easy, painless, or without effort

In an age of quick-fix, no effort, pay someone else to do it

we Xians must keep in view the labor involved in regularly drawing close to this witness

It is hard work

to store up enough energy, concentration, emotional resources from our busy, haggard lives ...

to protect the Lord's Day as a day for attending to scripture, sacraments, fellowship, and service

to subdue to powerful voices/ideas/assumptions of the world around us ...

William Willemon – Methodist Bishop, Duke chaplain, author

When people say that the Bible is out of date, irrelevant, hopelessly trapped in another time ... What they really mean to say is that engaging the Bible is hard work.

Coming to the Bible on our own terms is the easy part.

Learning to come to Scripture on its own terms--

learning to start with Jesus Christ and then move to us,
now that takes a **lifetime**

I further note that Jacob must be subdued

his perpetual cycle of grasping-cheating-stealing must be brought to a halt

in order for God to bless him and use him in the way he intends

We make our homes and our living in a cultural that trains us to assume that we know best exactly what we need/want

Amazon.com tracks my book purchases so closely that it tailers what products are shown on the first page of the website to suit my tastes, trends, and habits

And so, often without even being aware, we expect Scripture to do the same: to tailor itself to our needs ...

But scripture will not be domesticated like that, because *God will not be domesticated like that*

Conservative/liberal
Progressive/traditional
Cynical/idealistic
Self-aggrandizing/self-loathing

Whatever your assumptions, whatever your disposition—*beware*

Scripture is not safe. It will mess with us, dismantle us, form and reform us, until we are ready to hear a word from the Lord.

What C.S. Lewis says of Aslan the Lion so I say about the Bible

It is not safe, but it is good.

My least favorite moments in pastoral ministry have been when someone has said to me *We'll be changing congregations. Our spiritual needs are not being met.*

Since when was Xianity about meeting people's spiritual needs?

Christianity is about dying: dying to self ... in order that we might be reborn. About Jacob being subdued, in order to be blessed.

Submission is a risky matter

Cede over the control, definition, authority of your life to
one whose character is flawed, whose intentions are devious
and you might just lose your life

But to be subdued by one who himself
has given over his life for our sake

whose character is good, whose grace abounds

To lose your life to one like this means
that you might just **gain** your life in the end

***I finally note that Jacob is, in the end:
blessed, even given a new name***

There he goes, Jacob-the-scoundrel

walking away from Penuel

into a newly-created future

Look closely: You see he **walks with a limp**

That annoying little twinge in his hip:
a daily reminder that he is not, in fact,
the center of the universe

But look closely again: He's not complaining; he's grinning

Because he's got a new name, he is a new man

No longer is he grasping
precisely because he has been grasped

Broken? Yes. But also blessed.

There is much I hope I will be able to do for you ...

There will be, God willing, much we can accomplish together
But let it be

that the most **important thing** I can do for you

the most **vital effort** we can make, one with another

is a **regular engagement with this living word**

So gather the Trustees, and let them put up ropes around the
walls, put in a padded floor, and some bleachers for our
neighbors to watch

Gather the Deacons, have them secure plenty of towels, those
water bottles boxers like, and some stools for in between rounds

Gather the Elders, to ensure the scuffle is fair and faithful, that
the rounds start/end on time, that we tussle according to the
rules set down for us

throw in a preacher or two to call out the right moves

and then let's get to it, shall we?

Every Sunday

wrestling with God

round and round we go:
with scripture, with the Spirit, with Christ

until we ourselves are **subdued**
and Christ is lifted up among us

Says the Lord:

No longer will you be called **scoundrals/sadsacks/sinners**.

From now on you will be called, CHRISTIANS.

Broken? Yes. But also blessed. Blessed, indeed.