

What I really like to do when I'm preparing a sermon...is to read the scripture passage several days ahead of time. If I simply read the text...then let it sit in my brain...I find that it begins to seep into my life. The text or story becomes alive for me!

And so, some days ago, I reread this morning's story of Jacob wrestling by the river Jabbok. I awoke one night this last week, just before dawn, and found myself struggling with some decisions in my own life. And it occurred to me that I was experiencing just what Jacob had experienced as he slept and wrestled during his night beside the river Jabbok.

Now, Jacob already knew that God sometimes speaks through dreams or visions or whatever it is that happens during long and sleepless nights. Just before today's passage, you can read the story of Jacob's famous 'ladder dream.' We'll sing about that right after this sermon!

For you and me, it's much the same. It's in the dark of night, the business of the day over, when such images keep us awake! Why is it that so often when we face major decisions in our lives, we find it so easy to ignore them during the day. However, somehow, in the hours just before dawn, those decisions star us directly in the face. They become suddenly very clear and unavoidable.

Now, I don't know about you, but I sometimes seem to awaken at about 3 a.m., and am not able to go back to sleep until I do some wrestling on my own! Apparently, I'm not the only one besides Jacob who experiences this phenomenon. I've asked other people if they have also wrestled with God during the night, and I've received some interesting answers!

One man told this story: "As a teenager, I suffered a ruptured appendix. I wrestled with God, and I said, 'I'm so sick I don't want to live anymore. But if there's something you want me to do, then I'll keep on fighting.' He said, 'I was struggling with what it meant to be a young person who could die. And most of that happened at night when things were quieter in the hospital.'"

Others report wrestling in the early dawn hours with such issues as:

*What's the best thing to do when children are giving parents great challenges.

*What to do when parents are not able to take care of themselves.

*How to deal with feelings after a loved one dies.

*What to do when a friend or family member seems to be taking a hurtful path in life.

*How to handle the moral, emotional and physical aspects of romantic relationships.

*All of the above issues are made more complex as we live through this Coronavirus Pandemic. Now we have different decisions to make:

*How to gather as family when there are different feelings about physical distancing and wearing facemasks.

*What to do when Face Book and other social media platforms become areas of conflict and debate over how to handle the Pandemic and also over social and political issues. How can we remain in contact with family members while avoiding debate and anger?

*I'm sure that you could add the parts of your life that you wrestle with in the wee hours of the morning to this list!

The fact is that any of us who are sincere and thoughtful and take life seriously, wrestle with many decisions and issues. We sometimes find that WE are trapped between a rock and a hard place, just as Jacob found himself trapped thousands of years ago.

This family saga which runs through the books of Genesis and Exodus—the story of Jacob and all his family, is one of my favorites!

A short catch-up on this family:

Last Sunday, we shared how Jacob and Rebekah were married in the late Sarah's tent. Their union resulted in the birth of twins Esau and Jacob. You may remember the story of a young Jacob swindling his brother Esau out of his birthright in a hungry moment. He traded Esau a bowl of bean stew for his blessing and inheritance. Because of this incident, Jacob fled from an angry Esau (who threatened to KILL Jacob!) Jacob traveled far away and stayed with his mother's brother Laban.

To make a long story short, Jacob works for Laban for many years. He marries Laban's two daughters Leah and Rachel, has eleven sons (and likely many daughters as well,) and becomes quite wealthy. Jacob begins to think about going home at about this time, with the birth of his eleventh son Joseph,. It seems that in spite of his own faults (and though he is STILL afraid of Esau's temper,) Jacob wishes to make peace with his brother.

So, Jacob gathers his wives, servants and children. He packs up all his belongings and sets off for home. Today's passage finds Jacob at the border of his homeland, Just hours away from a reunion with Esau. It is at this juncture that Jacob is indeed 'caught between a rock and a hard place.' You see, Jacob and his wife Rachel had stolen livestock and household items from Laban as they departed! (For more juicy details of this fascinating story, look in Genesis, chapter 30. I also recommend the only lightly fictionalized novel 'The Red Tent.')

You can see why it's not possible for Jacob to return to Laban's household. He was lucky to escape as he had! And what stood in Jacob's forward path? Jacob (still fearing the wrath of Esau,) had sent messengers ahead to Esau bearing gifts and words of reconciliation and peace.

Those messengers returned quite shortly with the news that Esau was coming (with 400 men) to meet Jacob. You can imagine how concerned, even terrified, this could make Jacob! AAAH! Jacob thought, “Apparently, my brother has not forgotten that clever trick I played on him so long ago.”

So, Laban was BEHIND Jacob, and Esau was IN FRONT of him. You see, Jacob TRULY was caught ‘between a rock and a hard place!!!’ There was nothing left to do but pray. WHICH JACOB DID. He knelt down and this is what he said (in essence:)

“God, you yourself have said that you are the god of my family and of all my ancestors. You yourself was the one who said, without any prompting on my part, that I was to go home and you would look after me. I also recall that you were the one who revealed yourself to me years ago and made me some promises.

Now, I know that I have certainly not deserved all that you have done for me. But, God, all your past favors and promises don’t mean much unless you can now save me from my brother Esau! I know, I really know that he is going to come and kill me! If he kills me and wipes out all my children, than HOW in the world can your promises come true? Amen.”

Jacob’s family and goods are sent over the river ahead of him. He spends this last night alone. And there Jacob is, restless and frightened in that time before dawn (maybe at 3 a.m.) Just who or what is Jacob wrestling with? Is it himself? His brother? God? Or can these three be ONE?

During the wrestle, Jacob is told (in essence,) “You think that your struggle has only been with other people. But in tricking and swindling and stealing, you have also stolen from God! And so, I will call you not Jacob, but Israel, that is to say, ‘one who struggles with God.’” Jacob does not become perfect by a long shot. But he learns that life is not so clear cut as he once thought. To do right by God, he has to do right by people! Jacob has indeed become the one who struggles with God, one who is willing to deal with life’s deeper issues.

Like Jacob, you and I inherit the chance to also become 'strugglers with God.' Like Jacob, we won't have all the answers to life or solutions to our problems zapped to us during these struggles. And when we are blessed by God as Jacob was, it doesn't mean that our lives will be smooth sailing, or that everything will be all right. Quite to the contrary!

Something changed that night by the river Jabbok for Jacob . He had been given a gift which could never be taken back. Jacob did not emerge from his struggle unscathed. The scripture says that from that time on, he walked with a limp.

You and I also don't emerge from the stresses and struggles of our lives unscathed. Each of us carry our own spiritual, emotional and psychological limps, scars and wounds with us into our own futures. And those of us who have wrestled with deeply profound and difficult issues are not ashamed of the marks we bear from these struggles. People who have struggled through pain and despair and decision often find a real blessing in their wounds, scars and limps!

As 'people who struggle with God,' we can develop new strength, new depth and new life! As I am delivering this sermon, we are months deep into a Pandemic. We are struggling, wrestling with so many issues and decisions, personally and as a church.

One thing I do know for sure, as Jacob discovered, however we cope alone and however our church is gathered, God will be there! As we struggle in those early morning hours before dawn, God's blessing can turn the pain of the struggle into the embrace of the Spirit! PRAISE GOD! Amen.