

GENESIS 32:22-31

PSALM 17:1-7, 15

ROMANS 9:1-5

MATTHEW 14:13-21

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost; Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 30, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

### ***Wrestlemania?***

**In many ways Jacob had been wrestling with something or somebody his whole life, including himself. From inside the safety of the womb, as he began to emerge from the darkness, the fair skinned one following close behind, literally on his heels, wrestling with his minutes-older not-so-twin brother Esau, grabbing the hairy one by the heel and holding on for dear life. As W. Gunther Plaut translates Torah, “Two peoples are in your belly, two nations shall branch off from each other as they emerge from your womb. One people shall prevail over the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” Yes, Jacob would become a wrestler extraordinaire, a natural inclination we might suppose, based on what seemed to be his predisposed proclivities. Perhaps as early as childhood, precious in every way, Jacob was a troubled, seemingly tormented, tortured, soul. As the Eagles once sang, “a restless spirit on an endless flight,” his psyche seemingly overwhelmed by poor decisions that constantly haunted him, stalking him, shadowing his being like a dark cloud in every way, following him everywhere he went, every place he found himself, shadow boxing at every turn. Not only is the story of this extended family a quintessential study in family systems, a family systems nightmare, but it also offers a psychological profile that is off the chain! It will come to you! I cannot even begin to cite the studies that are available that use Jacob as an archetype, a poster boy, for psychological examination. No less than Carl Jung, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst extraordinaire, describes Jacob’s wrestling escapade as what “might have been viewed” in the struggle “with the angel as dream phenomena.” Nothing like a little Jungian angle to spice up a story! There is certainly a cosmic aspect at play in this purported**

dream sequence, a scenario we see frequently described in the biblical narrative. See Joseph and Isaiah for just two examples!

**Jacob's predicaments were largely his own fault. As we read his long and winding story, this morning we find him in a cage match with the Holy, the main event! In this corner, weighing in with all the creative power of the universe is the Holy One, strong and mighty; and in this corner, we find the narcissistic deceiver, subtly sly, diminutive in comparison! Beware his motives and tactics! He's got moves! In this story, we also find Jacob on the lamb, man on the run, a fugitive within his own family. Fearing the worst and his brother, the trickster believed that Esau was gaining, was in hot pursuit and was going to find him, hunting him down like game, tracking him down, and finally exact an ounce of his flesh, getting revenge on his prey for all the deceitful indiscretions this younger brother had committed. Jacob needed a ladder! You remember the story. Jacob had coerced Esau out of his birthright, all over a bowl of pottage. Strange story! It seemed like Jacob always had something up his sleeve, and just like the wily serpent, had beguiled Esau, tempting him not with fruit, but with that delicious red stuff, and stolen his birthright right out from under him, by all rights both birthright and blessing a guaranteed bequeathment intended for the eldest, part of an inheritance that comes with being first in any succession of sons, being male having its unfair privileges, both then, and sadly, still now. After all, the proof is in the proverbial pudding about Jacob's abusive tendencies, because history and texts reveal that we do not refer to the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Esau! No, we speak of the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob! Irony of irony, Jacob is the hero in this epic saga. Esau got the short end of the stick! Yes, Esau got screwed! Not since the violence of Cain's murder of his brother Abel have we seen such sibling rivalry expressed in bad brotherly behavior.**

**Despite Isaac's sense of fair play as the father of these two opposites "unattracting," Jacob was mom's golden child, special, chosen as the anointed one, the apple of his doting mother's eye, a parental favorite of Rebekah who made sure that this young whippersnapper got Esau's blessing as well, yes, the goods, all the goods. Yes, subversively, and with the stealth of a cold assassin, she threw the other fruit of her womb, poor young Esau, under the bus and backed over him a few good times for good measure. Once again, the story of**

**this clan is a family systems nightmare! Evidently, Jacob was also the apple of God's eye, if we accept this story from Genesis at face value. Just imagine the feelings of abject failure and oppressive insecurity Esau must have felt, a burden he carried as an extra, unwanted, millstone, the weight of being unchosen and seemingly rejected and unloved, his understandable resentment surely palpable, the animosity, that no doubt carried his every day. He must have felt a lot like Prince Harry, the spare! There was surely no love lost between Esau and his brother, no trust! And tired, old, Isaac seemed helpless, unwilling because he was unable to intervene. But all this seems oddly familiar, like, with a hint, just a bit, of déjà vu. Have we not seen a variation of this story before? O, yes! You will remember that when Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, Sarah insisted on disposing of Ishmael, born of the servant girl Hagar and Abraham, ironically this disturbingly deceptive idea conceived by Sarah who believed she was well beyond childbearing years despite a promise from an angel of God. So off went Ishmael and his mother, unceremoniously dismissed outright, forced to wander aimlessly, or so it seemed, retreating into the safe harbor of exile in a profoundly dangerous wilderness. But I digress; I often do! In perhaps the most perverse twist of irony, twisting the knife a little more, today's lection, which would seem should be all about Esau, is not a story about Esau at all, he but a bit player fulfilling a stooge's role, a supporting cast member. No, rather is a tale woven predominantly together by the Yahwist writer describing the heroic exploits of the younger Jacob, a legend in the making, the star of this biblical show. Today we find Jacob finally having his comeuppance, his back against the wall, uh, his back against the river in what would seem like a last stand for his sanity. He could run but he could not hide, not from God, not from Esau! There was no escaping this moment! We join Jacob down by the riverside where indeed, he would lay down his burden once and for all . . . but not without a fight!**

**We cannot help but wonder when we read this epic story as to whether Jacob was really wrestling with God? Or was he wrestling with himself, sometimes the difference hard to tell, yes, surely swirling around in his head. Indeed, it seems like he might have been wrestling with both! What a dizzying escapade we find in this confrontation, this conflagration, a throwdown, for the ages, or at least for the time being. In today's brief but very informative text, we read that Jacob had gotten up during the night and had taken his two wives, love those**

polygamy family values, very biblical, his two women servants, his eleven sons, and all his possessions, and gave them safe passage to the other side. We are told that Jacob stayed apart from them, keeping a safe distance as if he knew something was about to happen! We are not told on which side of the river he tarried. We are not sure! Who cares? And suddenly out of nowhere, Jacob found himself wrestling with an unknown man! Was it Esau, a brotherly surprise attack, sneaking up on his brother unawares in the night, protectively silhouetted by the cover of darkness? Whoever it was, this man was apparently, obviously, overmatched by Jacob, yes, this diabolical mere mortal who had built up a lot of frustration, testosterone overload, long growing accustomed to wrestling with any and everything, with something or somebody, always covering his backside. Paranoia plays strange tricks on the human psyche, vividly revealed in our most graphic dreaming! And if this was a dream, what a technicolor dream sequence it turned out to be. Much like other biblical stories in which humans masquerade as angels or deities, ancient anthropomorphism, we quickly learn that this man was not a man, but was indeed God, perceived in the flesh, and yet, God was ill-equipped for this match, not ready for this adversary, a most worthy opponent. This manifestation of God was definitely not a portrayal of God as omnipotent, almighty, all powerful, this physical confrontation more than the Divine could handle. Oh, the irony of the moment! Jacob had God in a vice grip, perhaps placing him in a choke hold, a vice grip now ready for the count, refusing to let the Holy One off the mat until he received God's direct blessing. Jacob wins again! God loses! No, it looks like this fight was rigged, fixed from the start! God wins! No telling how many rounds this bout took because they went head-to-head, toe to toe, all night long! The man who had stolen his brother's blessing now wanted a blessing from God and he got it. God inquires of his very fit sparring partner this titan's name, assuming a not-so-omniscient-all-knowing posture. Jacob introduces himself and God renames him on the spot, calling him Israel, a name that needs no further introduction or explanation. As with Moses who would inquire one day on a mountainside, Jacob in turn desires to know God's name, a request that was all but ignored. But Jacob received something even better. The usurper won the bigger prize, the biggest prize, the only prize, blessed by the Holy, seeing God face-to-face but living to tell the tale, free to fight again another day. As the sun rose Jacob now was the beneficiary of a limp because of a blow to his thigh, God striking him below the belt, a low blow

**indeed, a cheap shot, a shot below the waist never allowed in wrestling. All is fair in love and God! Yes, God cheated! But guess who makes the rules?**

In all respects Jacob should have been a gambler, his life always coming up roses, always landing on his feet. As Rod Stewart sings, “some guys have all the luck!” Having survived and succeeded as he squared off against God, Israel, as he was now called, would soon be the unexpected recipient of another “blessing” as his brother Esau would not only embrace him, but would hospitably run to greet him, showering him with affection, all things forgotten and forgiven as if they never happened, as if in a nanosecond suspended in time. In many ways we might consider Jacob’s encounter with his brother Esau anticlimactic compared to his tussle with God, but not so because Jacob would now live to recount the story, surviving this potentially tragic sibling reunion. Though Esau had been hot on his heels, pun intended, remember their birth adventure, everything turned out just fine, all would be well, Jacob overcoming his worst fears as Esau surprisingly extended an olive branch of forgiveness and grace. Jacob, Teflon in every way imaginable! Yes, some people just seem to have it made, overcoming, triumphing despite their foibles, their worst inclinations.

**So, what about our story? What can we take away from what really is a bizarre encounter between mortal and immortal, the human and the divine, in so many ways an encounter that appeared to be a grudge match for the ages, both wrestlers on the same side, yes, playing for all the marbles, or at least Jacob’s? The first observance that comes to my mind is that this story gives us permission if not an expectation. We do not have to approach God with kid gloves, pardon the pun, but are more than allowed, encouraged, emboldened and empowered, to wrestle with our belief in God and the faith it spawns. Authentic, genuine, faith, faith born of honesty and integrity, never comes easily nor should it. Faith and faithful living is born of our struggles, the proverbial “slings and arrows” of life, the intentional way we ask the tough questions, raise the hard issues, ponder the complexities that come with any theological inquiry. Thinking theologically is an exhausting and exhilarating exercise, a rewarding process that is always a process, demanding complete concentration, total intentionality, an enterprise rooted in our deepest desires to understand all things mysterious, transcendent awe and wonder that challenge our mind and tug at our heart,**

**mystery always beyond our full knowing.** As Job, doing his own form of wrestling and leaning into the pre-scientific mythology of his day, responds to the inquisition from Bildad the Shuhite, shortest man in the Bible, reflecting on all things theological, “Indeed I know that this is so; but how can a mortal be just before God? If one wished to contend with God, one could not answer God once in a thousand. God is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has resisted God, and succeeded?—God who removes mountains, and they do not know it, when God overturns them in anger; who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; who commands the sun, and it does not rise; who seals up the stars; who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea; who made the (constellations) Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south; who does great things beyond understanding, and marvelous things without number? Look, God passes by me, and I do not see God; God moves on, but I do not perceive God. God snatches away; who can stop God? Who will say to God, ‘What are you doing?’” Yes, no, we can no more answer the question about the One who made the stars and the universe, deciphering Holy Otherness, Ground of All Being, even remotely comprehending God-stuff, than we can answer the question in the 1961 doo wop song, “who put the bomp in the bomp bah bomp bah bomp; who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong; who put the bop in the bop shoo bop shoo bop; who put the dip in the dip da dip da dip?” I’m just saying! Yes, Spirit is as Spirit does!

**Folks, in the final analysis it is all about the questions and not the answers, it is about the means and not the end. Discovering holiness, whatever that is, learning about God is about the journey, not the destination. Therein is where we find meaning! Therein is where we find frustration! It is in our doubts where our faith ironically is nourished and nurtured, our beliefs steeled by a healthy skepticism, even our most cynical moments. Yes, doing theology is counter intuitive to every other empirical exercise we are taught, our struggles seemingly unsatisfactory but providing glimpses, cracked doors or windows that give us insight, keeping us coming back for more. Look at the circuitous journey Jacob traveled, a trip that saw him go and come full circle, leaving the land of promise, and, just like a boomerang, returning right back to that very place once more. But oh, the transformation that this sojourn through the wilderness, figuratively and literally, wrought in his life, what a difference made, changing him forever,**

**yes, for the good. Oh, if only every narcissist could be so fortunate and learn! As Seals and Crofts sang, "we may never pass this way again." Life changing! Name changing! Future changing!**

In all honesty, Jacob seemed the most unworthy candidate to receive all the grace, the blessings, he purportedly gained. His story is a reminder that God never gives up on any one of us, that we are all graciously loved and valued, continuously pursued, never beyond God's goodness or grasp, never excommunicated from God's ever expanding and widening circle. Despite the evils we see around us, the cunning and conniving, the lies and deceit, the abuses leveled by one individual or group against another, all that is wrong, God never quits on any of us, continually seeking us out like the one among the ninety and nine. All God desires from any of us is that we do the best that we can do, that we try to do better, yes, that we own our stuff and seek forgiveness, restitution inherent in that humble act in its own right and rite, seeking this grace more from one another than from God. Jacob was making mistakes before he came out of the womb, and his life continued to spiral down the proverbial drain, an out-of-control downhill freefall, until he reached rock bottom, but thankfully there is always a rock bottom, and we can fall no lower. **So, celebrate the days when your belief, your faith, is as strong as it can be. Celebrate the days when you are doubtful, when skepticism, even cynicism, consumes the order of your day because God is still present, God is still in the midst. No matter, our trust is in God that all will be well. It is our hope! It is our dream! It is our prayer!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and welcomes all comers to the holy wrestling ring! Amen and amen.**