

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John Rohrs
7 Pentecost A; July 31, 2011
Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Wrestling with God and Ourselves

Summer is a time for beach reading. You've got your family dramas, your crime thrillers, your steamy romances. But what I told you that you could find all of that in one book – a book that's been on the best-seller list for millennia? That's right – all you need is the Book of Genesis. Just in the last two months, we've had a miraculous birth, attempted murder, brutal deception, a daring escape, and so much more. It all leads to today's reading which features the climactic drama – a midnight visit from God.

The main character in this story is Jacob, one of the two sons of Isaac. You'll remember from a few weeks back that when Isaac was getting old, it came time for him to give his blessing and inheritance to Esau, his oldest son. But the story takes a fateful turn when the younger son, Jacob, tricks his blind father into giving him the blessing.

Just then, Esau arrives, ready to claim his inheritance. But what's done is done. The blessing cannot be revoked. Needless to say, Esau is furious, and he plans to kill Jacob as soon as he can. But Jacob doesn't give him the chance. He runs for it – flees to live with some relatives in a foreign land.

Now, fast forward twenty years. Jacob is married with children, he's amassed property and wealth, and he decides it's time to go home. But going home means facing his brother, who he hasn't seen since he escaped his wrath. As Jacob gets near Esau's land, he sends a messenger ahead to tell his brother that he's coming, and to offer animals and servants as a gift. Clearly, Jacob is trying to buy his brother's forgiveness.

Well, after awhile the messenger comes back and says that in fact Esau is headed this way, along with four hundred men. Now that doesn't sound good. Jacob is terrified, and he splits up his family and his flocks, and he tells them to go on ahead, across the river. Jacob stays behind, alone, and spends the night on the riverbank.

That's where we pick up our story today. It's the dark of night; Jacob is alone and scared. Suddenly, a man appears and begins to wrestle with him. Or maybe it's not a man; maybe it's an angel or a demon. It's dark, and Jacob can't be sure. Whoever it is, it's a strong foe, and they wrestle all night long. At one point, the man puts Jacob's hip out of joint, but Jacob endures. He tells his opponent that he won't let go, he won't give in, until the man gives him a blessing. And so he does. He blesses him and names him Israel, meaning he who struggles with God. Just then, the sun rises, the man disappears, and Jacob concludes that he has wrestled with God and has survived.

Obviously, this is a strange story. It's hard to picture it as a real, physical encounter – a man wrestling with God. But it's easy to picture it as a spiritual encounter. We can well imagine Jacob falling asleep, the fears in his mind turning into nightmares as he prepares to meet his brother. In those haunting dreams, Jacob is confronted by God. At the same time, he's confronted by his inner demons, by years of guilt and sorrow and fear. A great battle ensues, and the real battle is in the heart of Jacob's soul.

It is this symbol, this manifestation of internal struggle that is the great truth of this story. The fact is, we all carry burdens and wounds and fears, and often the only path to a new life, to a whole life, is through struggle. A struggle with God, maybe, but also a struggle with ourselves. And that kind of struggle can be painful. Just look at our story. Jacob is wounded, scarred by battle, and yet that very struggle paves the way for healing and new life. He is never the same after that night. He gains a limp, but he also becomes a new and better man.

Like Jacob, we all bear wounds: love lost, hopes dashed, promises broken – so many things done and left undone. But perhaps Jacob's story can give us the courage to face our fears, and to wrestle hope and healing out of old hurts. It's not easy, and it may leave us scarred, but it is the path of redemption and new life.

Well that's all fine and good, you might say, but what about the rest of the story? What happens to Jacob and Esau? Well, the next morning, Jacob wakes up, and he sees Esau running toward him, not with a sword but with open arms. They embrace and begin again as brothers and friends. It seems that Esau too had faced his demons, and his God, and found peace. I pray the same for each of us. Amen.