

Wrestling with God

Eighth in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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October 27, 2019

Genesis 32:3-12

³Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; ⁵and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’” ⁶The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” ⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, ⁸thinking, “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.”

⁹And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹²Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

Genesis 32:22-33:4

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore 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. ³³Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ²He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. ⁴But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

Renowned English professor at Duke University, Reynolds Price, also had a life-long interest in biblical scholarship. His autobiographical account of his battle with cancer entitled, *A Whole New Life*, had a broad following among fans of his poetry and novels as well as in the religious community. When spinal cancer left him partially paralyzed, struggling to make sense of this tragic turn in life, he had an unmistakable encounter with God. He wrote about how he experienced the wholly mysterious, and yet palpably present God come so near to him that he felt God pick him up and carry him when he could no longer walk on his own.

Not especially religious before his cancer, through the darkest days of his life, a new faith gave title to his book, *A Whole New Life*. In response to that book, Reynolds Price received a letter from a young adult who had been forced to leave medical school because of a cancer diagnosis. In what Price called a “brief, blunt and un-self-pitying eloquence,” Jim Fox asked the author probing questions about the existence of God and the nature of God’s care. They began a correspondence, which Price turned into a book of reflections, entitled *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?*

Drawing upon philosophy, religion and English literature, as well as his own season of wrestling Reynolds Price shared both his clear knowledge of who God is, and his understanding of how mysterious God also is, writing: “In the years of my own confrontation with cancer, loss, and chronic pain, I experienced fairly steadily the sense of being accompanied almost always by what seemed God or a full-fledged messenger of God. With that companionship, I was ultimately led back into a new and transformed life and work... But that conviction serves as no feather bed beneath me, no opiate; for I am aware of the Bible’s dismaying assertion that, it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.... hands that are neither predictable nor intimately

knowable. Yet, with no shade of doubt, I can join Paul in his strongest conviction. God has “cared”... for our earthly lives and thereafter.”¹

God has cared for our earthly lives and thereafter. The scoundrel Jacob literally falls into the hands of the living God – the neither predictable nor intimately knowable hands of God.

For eight weeks we have considered the formative promise to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants: *If you get up and go to the place I will show you, you will be blessed so that through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* We have seen how Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Leah and Rachel – all have struggled to trust that promise and the God who gave it. I believe, we too struggle to trust that promise and stay faithful to its blessing, and if our faith is really alive, I think most of us come to a moment in life when we find ourselves asking the question Jim Fox asked Reynolds Price: “Does God exist and does God care?”

As with Fox and Price, that question arises in our own agonizing battles with cancer; or through other forms of physical and mental illness. It comes to us in the tossing and turning of night when our thoughts run wild in the dark. For some of us, the question of God’s existence and care is raised in the midst of the political chaos we are experiencing in our country; and when any momentum of forward movement is just stuck in the gridlock of Washington – while violence and poverty and environmental degradation persist.

The question about the nearness of God comes to us as it came to Jacob – in the estrangements we suffer among people we are supposed to honor and love, amid the regrets we have carried for years, the desperation for forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps that’s why no Biblical story engages us so dramatically and intimately as today’s picture of Jacob in a wrestling match with this holy stranger.

¹ Reynolds Price, *letter to a Man in the Fire*, p. 72-73.

It has been twenty years since Jacob hit the road after deceiving his old blind father, stealing his brother Esau's inheritance, and conspiring with his mother to hide out at his Uncle Laban's. There, he bargained with Laban for his wives, fathered twelve sons and a daughter by them and their maids. These sons will become the twelve tribes of Israel, with Joseph leading the clan into Egypt, and Judah becoming the great-grandfather many, many, many times over of Jesus of Nazareth. Along the way, this cheating trickster named Jacob received God's promise to be with him forever.

With the continuing undeserved promise that God is with him, now Jacob is heading home after twenty years, traveling back toward his brother, the one whom he had tricked out of everything. He sent presents for Esau ahead of him, and divided his family into two camps going in different directions, so that, in case Esau meets him – with arms loaded rather than arms out-stretched, he won't lose everything. Just in case Esau hasn't let bygones be bygones, which is likely since Jacob has received word that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men.

So on that last night before he meets his brother, on the banks of the river, Jacob finally meets his real match. The holy stranger assaults him, and he wrestles with this strong and mysterious presence as long as it takes to bring them to the light of day. In final desperation as the dawn is breaking, Jacob cries: "Tell me, I pray, your name." "Why is it that you ask me my name?" comes the response and the question hovers in the mist of the early morning dawn.

God will not be named, for if you know someone's name you have power. When you say the name, a head turns; when you call, you can expect an answer. God, however, will not be named. But in that struggle, the mysterious stranger gives Jacob a new name. Jacob, whose name means over-reacher, supplanter, becomes Israel, Isra – strives with, el – God; Israel means strives with God.

The community of faith named Israel, from which we Christians are descended, is ultimately formed not by success, nor shrewdness, nor acquisition of land, nor goodness and faithfulness even. Ancient Israel becomes God's people by being assaulted by God. God blesses Jacob again, but God also wounds him. Jacob walks away from that holy struggle with a new name and a new limp. With a new power and a new weakness.

"At the very heart of our religious tradition," another preacher has written, "is an uneasiness with the tendency to know too much. There is an uneasiness to eliminate mystery by assuming that we know the full truth about who God is. There is uneasiness to define God with such precision that those who question, doubt, or differ are shut out..."²

God, in our tradition, will not be named or nailed down, or restricted by the paraphernalia of human religion, (and this is quite a statement coming from a Presbyterian) including the creeds and theologies of our religion. God is a living God, free, unpredictable, surprising, and always mysterious.

Jacob's story is the story of the young medical student, Jim Fox, riddled with cancer. His is the story of wise, old, accomplished and wounded English Professor Reynolds Price. Jacob's story is our story in the ways of our doubt and deceit, guilt, regret and fear, trusting in God and wondering if God will really come through in the end. If we want to be really close to God, it's hard to do without wrestling God to the mat.

President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Serene Jones, will be our theologian in residence in late January when we celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary of the Middleton Counseling Center. Her most recent book, *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a*

² John Buchanan, "Blessed Intruder," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 7/24/05.

Fractured World, is a poignant memoir about her theological wrestling through a family history fraught with difficult relatives and abuse, the death of a close friend in her young adult years, family's struggle with the death penalty, hatred and forgiveness when her brother-in-law was injured in the Oklahoma City bombing, infertility issues, the birth of a child and a divorce, and the crumbling of institutional support of the seminary she was called to serve.

Theologian Serene Jones wrestles to find grace and meaning in her fractured life as well as in the world. At one point Jones recounts a conversation with her father, himself a life-long theology professor, who had, along the way, given up on the God he'd spent a career teaching about. It was toward the end of his life when she asked him, "Dad, do you still not believe in God? His response surprised her. "Serene, it's not that I don't have any faith; it's just that I've put thinking about it aside for a while.

"You know, I spent my whole life thinking about God." She pushed him: "So when you put the thinking aside, what's left?" "We find our ultimate destiny in God, daughter dear. I still know that." "Would you call that ultimate destiny love?" she said, (Like) "God's love is the biggest love ever?" "Well, yes, God is love, but not quite that. 'Biggest' as an adjective, still suggests that God's love can be defined by human metrics of size and shape. It suggests God is an entity that has attributes, like people do. But God isn't one more person or entity among others. God is God. Existing beyond the words and ideas we pile on God – even beyond the word 'existing.' ... We can say one thing. God comes to us, even though we cannot reach God. That's love. It's all we can say. We can only call it love."³

God came upon Jacob – that night beside the Jabbock River – as unknowable, unpredictable love. After a lifetime of deceiving and running and hiding, God wrestled with Jacob in a shroud of mystery. In

³ Serene Jones, *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*, p. 304-5.

the morning Jacob was changed. He had a new name and he had a new wound. And his dreaded fear of doing battle with his brother was redeemed – it was changed into a moment of forgiveness and love. Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Then the family of faith was on the road again to fulfill God’s promise that in due course – all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

That God of mystery comes to us too in stories like this one, in our own complicated family and personal stories, to be near us, to love us and also to turn us into more loving people. Not just for our sake alone, but for the sake of the world, the sake of all God’s children – that’s everyone – in the world.

God wrestles with us in order to lead us into the light of that new and hopeful day when every living person is blessed by God.

AMEN.