

Wrestling Alone in the Dark

Genesis 32:22-30

The poet, James Thurber, once said, “All men must learn before they die, what they are running from and to and why.”

This morning we catch up with Jacob on the muddy banks of the Jabbok River. Twenty years earlier he left Bethel where God promised to go with him and guide him through all his days.

In those twenty-year Jacob accumulates a couple of wives, eleven children, a host of servants, and a wealth of cattle, sheep, and camels. He’s left his father-in-law, Laban and is now preparing to meet his estranged brother, Esau. As night comes, Jacob separates himself from people and possessions, and enters a life and death struggle for purpose and meaning.

Anybody here who has walked through a dark night of the soul, ever been afraid to turn their face toward home, or found themselves in a wrestling match with God, can identify with this ancient struggle of a middle-aged man named Jacob.

Verse 24 says that Jacob was left alone. Such **times of solitude call us to introspection, evaluation, and alteration**. We are busy people. We fill our lives with things to do, places to go, projects to finish, appointments to keep. But every once in a while, we’d be wise to shut the door and separate ourselves from all our stuff in order to restore our souls.

Henri Nouwen, in one of his last writings, says, “I found myself in a hospital following a car accident. At first I thought it was nothing. Then I was told I was bleeding internally and might not live. Surprisingly, I found the threat of death to be peaceful beyond my understanding. It was when I woke up and discovered myself still alive in this world, that I became restless. In my days of recovery, I discovered I had some unfinished business of the soul. There were certain people I still hadn’t forgiven. There were deep confessions I had hesitated to make. I realized I had been living in denial of my own mortality.”

Back to our text which says that suddenly in the night, someone seizes Jacob from behind, and slams him to the ground in a bitter struggle for life. Rabbi Harold Kushner says this stranger in the night is none other than the conscience of Jacob calling him to accountability. A life of deceit, denial, and duplicity is finally doing him in. Here, alone on the muddy banks of the Jabbok River, he has to face himself.

People all wrapped up in themselves make very small packages. That night on the Jabbok River, Jacob was all wrapped up in himself.

I appreciate Rabbi Kushner’s perspective on this passage, but as I read Genesis 32, I’m led to believe that someone else besides himself had Jacob in a headlock that night. I believe that **Jacob is wrestling with none other than God**.

It’s a tug of war, a hand-to-hand combat with the Almighty. It’s fingers on the flesh, touched to the bone. Jacob wants a blessing. God wants a new person. Back and forth they struggle and struggle through the night.

Hebrews 10:31 says, **It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God**. Indeed. You see, God-lite religion will not do in a down and dirty world. The God of Jacob is our refuge. We must never forget that the God of Jacob will get us in the gut, punch our pride, grab our greed, level our lust, demand our honesty and command our all.

This was no childhood skirmish on the riverbank of Jabbok. This is the Holy Hulk in hand-to-hand combat with Tricky Jake in a life and death match for eternity.

At daybreak, this Divine/human struggle is still intense. The stranger in the night says, "Let me go" and Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." In verse 27, the stranger says to Jacob, "What's your name?"

Shakespeare once said, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Shakespeare evidently never considered the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament, a name always symbolizes a character. It's one with nature. Proverbs 22:1 says, **A good name should be chosen over great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.**

Names are important to us as well. We name our children, our cats, our dogs, our cars, our boats, our bungalows. We name everything. Our things become personal when we put a name to them.

The stranger says in the night, "What's your name?" And Jacob replies, "My name is Jacob." Jacob - the trickster, the supplanter, the heel-grabber. "My name is Jacob. My father did not like me. My brother cannot stand me. My mother sent me away."

"What is your name?" "My name is Jacob. If I cannot be loved, at least I'll be in control." "What is your name?" "My name is Jacob!" Driven, deceitful, successful, powerful, lonely, afraid. Jacob was not very proud of his name.

I wonder today if there are some names in your life that you need to abandon? Are there names that have gotten attached to you, but do not belong to you? Dumb, drunk, pest, problem, promiscuous, mean, manipulative, victim. I don't know what it is, but you do. You know the name. Names that have been attached to us over the years.

God Almighty is asking you to confess it today in such a way you would be freed from it. "Jacob, what is your name?"

Well, the Good News for you today is that God has a new name for you. You'll find it in verse 28, where the stranger in the night says to Jacob, **"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and men and have overcome."**

The name Israel meant the straight one, God rules, father of nations, patriarch of people, transmitter of truth, the blessed of God. Israel is still a nation today.

You see, Israel was not a new label on an old jar, but a new substance in the life and soul of a single struggling man. That day, Jacob the trickster became Jacob a treasure. The heel became a healer. The supplanter transformed into a saint.

The purpose of wrestling in the dark of the night is soul purification, which leads to a new identification. Jacob didn't need to get back to his old self that morning. He needed to put on a whole new self. He didn't need restoration but transformation. Your name is no longer Jacob. Your name is Israel.

By the mercies of God, you and I are given a new name. We have put on the name Christian. Christian is more than something put in the blank space on an identification form for college or job application. To be Christian is to take on a new nature. It's to have your name written in the Book of Life.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul writes, **"If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come."** There's a new name written down in glory. Your name is on the dotted line. You belong to the family of God. You are a Christian.

I know, it seems trivial in our day and age. OK, I'm a Christian, so what? Jacob must have felt the same as he woke up that first morning coming to grips with all that had happened. But he walked into the sunrise named Israel, the father of all nations, and he lived that day on worthy of the name. So must we rise to live a life worthy of the name Christian.

Amen.