

Okay, so this story is dramatic and, in my opinion, fascinating.

How often do we hear about people in the Bible getting into fistfights?!

Hardly ever, let alone two men in the middle of the night, and one of them has a very mysterious and unknown identity.

This story alone could be right out of a good novel.

But it's even richer when we understand it in context, in light of what Jacob has gone through.

In this story, Jacob is headed home after being away for 20 years.

He had to flee his home originally, because he was a liar and a cheat, and his brother, Esau wanted to kill him.

With the help of their mother, Jacob, the younger brother, stole the birthright and inheritance from his older brother, Esau by tricking their father, Isaac.

Here are the terms on which they parted 20 years earlier:

“Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’

⁴²But the words of her elder son Esau were told to [their mother] Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him,

‘Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you.

⁴³Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran,

⁴⁴and stay with him for a while, until your brother’s fury turns away—

⁴⁵until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him...” (Genesis 27: 41-45).

So, as far as Jacob knows, this is the environment that he’s coming home to.

You think it was hard for the Prodigal Son to return home, imagine coming home to someone who wants you dead.

But Jacob is no slouch, and while he’s been away, he’s gotten rich.

He was sent to live with his uncle, Laban, and got wealthy at his expense.

Trickery is arguably one of Jacob’s best skills.

So, he’s headed back home, and he sends a peace offering ahead of him to Esau, hoping to appease him, so that he’s less likely to want to kill him when he finally returns.

Jacob's peace offering includes oxen, donkeys, flocks of sheep and male and female slaves.

The response he gets?

Probably not what he wanted to hear.

The 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.' (32:6)

So, now, not only is Esau waiting for Jacob, but he has an army of 400 people with him!

Things are looking worse and worse for Jacob, as the text says,

'Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed,' so now he comes up with a new strategy.

"He divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking,

'If Esau comes to one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.' (32: 7-8)

Eventually, after sending the peace offering and dividing up the rest of his caravan, he eventually sends over his family, his eleven children, his two wives and two maids, probably hoping to garner some sympathy from Esau.

Now everyone is gone, and he is left alone for the night, sleeping on the stream bank by himself.

All of this background leads us to today's story where he wrestles with this being that we only know as a 'man,' and yet, at the end of the passage, he says that he has "seen God face to face" (32:30).

So this story is a turning point in Jacob's life, where he goes from being dishonest and conniving to being a committed and faithful person.

In fact, he becomes such a leader that the nation of Israel is named after him!

We'll get back to that in a minute.

Before this moment, he did not have a strong history of believing in God.

In fact, at one point, he is talking to his father and he refers to God as "*YOUR God*," implying that he doesn't want to have anything to do with this God.

And, up to this point all the encounters he has had with God have either been dreams or visions- we have nothing in the text that says Jacob has ever talked with God face to face before now.

In our Bible study class on Thursday night, we discussed how God communicates with us in our dreams, and I wonder if God does that because we are too dense to pay attention during the day.

At night, when we are sleeping, God can have our undivided attention.

Maybe before this, God had to use dreams to communicate with Jacob because he wanted nothing to do with God when he was awake.

But now Jacob has found himself in a corner and he's desperate.

We know that even the least faithful people often quickly learn how to talk with and listen to God when their back is up against the wall, and that's what happens with him.

Jacob, our self-serving soon-to-be-patriarch, for the first time in his life admits that he needs help, and he turns to God and he doesn't let go.

Jacob has a knack for being stubborn, as his name means, "heel," because the scriptures tell us that when he and his twin brother, Esau, were born, he was grasping onto Esau's heel.

Now, he's not clinging to his brother, but to this mysterious man in the night.

And when the man says, *"Let me go, for the day is breaking,"* Jacob responds, *"I will not let you go, unless you bless me."* (32:26).

His stubbornness is finally working in his favor.

He must have the presence of mind to know that this is not your ordinary man, as he asks the man for a blessing.

You don't ask just any average person for a blessing, he must know that this being is somehow different, important, set apart.

And when he realizes this, he doesn't let him go.

Even though Jacob's hip was put out of joint because this being hit him in the hip socket, he's too stubborn to let him go.

I don't know about you, but if I was wrestling with someone and they hit me so hard that it knocked my hip out of it's socket, I'd probably let go, no matter who the person was.

But not Jacob.

He's persistent, he demands a blessing (I didn't know that demanding blessings was kosher, but here it is anyways), and God actually looks favorably on his determination.

When the man, or God, sees how strong and convicted he is, God changes his name.

Now, names weren't meaningless in the Bible, in fact, quite the opposite.

When someone was named, it meant that they were important, and when a name was changed, it was a reflection of a change in status.

As I told you before, the name "Jacob" meant "he takes by the heel," referring to the way he held onto to Esau when they were born.

But after the fight, the man said, "*You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.*" (32:28).

Now, the definition of Israel is debated, but it means something to the effect of 'to persevere,' or 'God strives.'

I am not sure that I agree that Jacob prevailed in this fight, but who am I to argue with God?

Regardless, with this new name, Jacob enters into a new future, he turns away from being a selfish and manipulative man to being the leader of his descendants.

The nation of Israel is named after him, and he has 12 sons, and the 12 tribes of Israel are named after them.

Talk about a lot of responsibility!

But God knew that Jacob was up to the task, perhaps because he wrestled with his faith, he fought God and he was persistent, he didn't give up.

He had strength and tenacity and maybe sometimes that's more valuable than simply living a life of risk-free, harmless faith.

This text gives us permission to fight or question God.

Maybe God wants to be in the fray with us, not have us blindly accept things but to wrestle with them and question them and through that process, come to a deeper relationship with God that's hopefully more authentic to who we are.

One theologian also notes that physical intimacy and physical fighting are motivated by the same kind of energy, so maybe fighting with God can draw us closer to God.

And if the word 'Israel,' means that God strives, perhaps that indicates that this God, the God of our ancestors, is willing to enter into the fray and strive with humans.

I appreciate that.

I like thinking of God as one who doesn't give up on us, who sticks it out with us because God knows what we are capable of.

God could have just overlooked Jacob as he was sleeping on the bank of the river that night, but no.

God believed that he was capable of more, that he could be a better person, a leader, and God was willing to wrestle it out with him until he saw the same qualities in himself that God saw.

And Jacob is wounded in the process, for those of us who have gone through horrible or painful experiences, sometimes we are the best ones to be able to attest to our faith because we've been through the fray.

We are able to be present for others who are struggling because we have been there, we have fought with God and come out the other side.

So, yes, my friends, the good news is that we can wrestle and fight with God, God is strong enough to handle whatever we bring to the match.

And God is faithful enough to stick it out with us, knowing that although we might get some battle scars, we will come out more faithful on the other side.

Just like God believed in Jacob, God believes in us, otherwise God wouldn't hang in there with us.

The question is, do we believe enough in ourselves, and the people we can become, to have the strength and the tenacity to stick it out with God?

Amen.

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