

“Marked by Struggle”

August 20, 2017

In the Beginning: (God’s) Family Drama series

The story is told of Thomas Edison, the inventor, and the remark someone made to him about the many failures he had encountered in his search for a new storage battery. He tried 50,000 times before he achieved the desired result. Edison said, “Why I have gotten a lot of results. I know 50,000 things that won’t work.” Sometimes we only see the one outcome and don’t see the struggle to get there.

We get all of Jacob’s story in Genesis - struggle and all. Remember what happened to Jacob at the place he named Bethel? He had a dream of the stairway to heaven and his encounter with God. It was the place where he first understood God’s blessings for what they really are – a gift that can’t be grabbed or won, but can only be received.

Back then, he had left home for many reasons – but mainly to get away from Esau who threatened his life. Now after 20 years of living in Haran, God has told Jacob to go back home again.

And if you’re wondering how Jacob got along over those 20 years, there’s only been more drama. After his dream, he was the one who was deceived. Laban, Jacob’s future father-in-law, tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter, Leah, even though Jacob really wanted to marry Rachel. He worked seven years for each one of them. The drama continued as Rachel struggled to bear a child while Leah and her maid servant bore many. This is where we eventually get the twelve tribes of Israel - Jacob’s sons.

Jacob also tricked Laban into giving him the best of the flock. And then Jacob left with all of his family and livestock. That’s where we pick up today. Jacob, his wives, his kids, and his entire household are on the move to go back home where God has directed him to go – home again.

Jacob has prospered even as he has struggled, and yet those earlier conflicts are still there. When he discovers that Esau is coming to meet him, he’s worried. He has spent years estranged from Esau, and now the thought of what might happen...it’s troubling to say the least.

Consider Jacob’s life so far. One writer described him as a “walking civil war.” Have you ever felt like that before? Jacob has been at odds with everyone. First Esau, then Isaac, then Laban. Even Rachel and Leah have been competing for his loyalty.

Jacob’s happy moments have been few and far between. He rejoiced when he met God at Bethel that first time. Remember he said, “Surely the presence of the Lord

is in this place and I did not know it!" And he was joyful and thankful when he fell in love with Rachel.

But the past is overwhelming now. It is catching up to him, so much that he pours out his heart to God. After 20 years, it's about still anger. Jacob left home to avoid Esau's anger, and now he returns home fearing it still. Apparently, time hasn't healed those old wounds. Jacob is the picture of success and blessing on the outside, but inside he's just another person troubled by his current situation.

Perhaps his life isn't so far off from our own. He's in a midlife crisis – not the cliché type – but a spiritual kind. And this is one of the odd moments. He encounters a stranger in the night and wrestles until morning.

We have spiritual crises, too, though they come at different ages. We ask ourselves "who am I, really?" "What am I really about?" The stranger asks Jacob a question: "what is your name?" (**SLIDE**)

A name in Jacob's time means more than something that sounds good. A name is an identity. Jacob is the deceiver, the grabber, the trickster. He gets a new name from this stranger whom we understand to be God. Now he'll be called Israel because he's wrestled with God and come through.

It's interesting that Jacob asks for the stranger's name, too.

(**SLIDE**) To know someone's name in this time also meant that you had some power - and some connection. That question is never answered, but Jacob concludes that he's encountered God in a powerful way.

Lessons from Jacob are very relevant. He wanted God's blessing, but how he went for it brought pain. For all of his grabbing, and all that he did on his own to get what he wanted, he had to learn that his own strength wasn't enough. Don't we have to learn the same thing? We have times in our lives believing that we don't need God or the church or anyone else to tell us anything or to help us, but then we find that we can't make it alone.

That's just how Jacob is when he wrestles. Alone. Vulnerable. No one to help him. First, Jacob needed God's help to face his deepest hurt and biggest problems. He would confront Esau soon, and he didn't know what to expect. Jacob had done what he could do to calm the situation by sending a peace-offering, but perhaps it was manipulation to lessen the blow.

Our best efforts to smooth things over don't do the job when there are deeper wounds to be reconciled. When relationships have fallen through the cracks because of distance or conflict, our own strength isn't enough. Our honesty is key, but we need God's help, too.

Reconciliation is something God knows about. After all, God sent Jesus – fully human – so that we could be reconciled to God. So God can guide us in moments when human relationships are at stake.

Secondly, Jacob needed to face God first in order to face his personal responsibility for betrayal and pain. This encounter has fascinated Biblical scholars for years because Jacob names the stranger as God. It's one of my favorite parts of Genesis because it shows honest faith and the struggle that we sometimes have as we come to know God and as we live into that relationship. It's not all constant happiness and perfection, but rather a coming to know that God is Love and will love us always. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn about Jacob wrestling with God, and his words are powerful. He says, "thy nature, and thy name is Love."

Artists have painted many different interpretations of Jacob and the wrestler, but one by Rembrandt is the most interesting to me. (**SLIDE**) Jacob and the wrestler are locked together, but it's as if the wrestler is embracing Jacob.

What an image of God! When we feel that we're struggling with God, maybe God is trying to embrace us. Maybe God is already "in our face." Jacob has been the grabber, deceiver, and trickster – hurting others and himself along the way, not trusting God to lead him. But this wrestling match changes Jacob. His limp is a mark of the struggle, but also a mark of blessing to remind him that he is bound to God through the covenant.

Perhaps the most important lesson we learn from Jacob is that a life of faith is sometimes a life of struggle. One writer says: "...just because you've been hurt doesn't mean you aren't blessed, and just because you're blessed doesn't mean you won't get hurt. Whenever you wrestle with your conscience or one of the big questions of life, God is involved."

That doesn't mean that faith is a life full of hard times devoid of any happiness. But faith is real life. We experience hurt – not because God wills it, but because it's part of our human condition.

What's important is how we respond to God in the struggle. Will we blame God and turn our back? Or will we let God embrace us and guide us to a new day?

When we encounter God, we're never the same again. Jacob is a new man – marked by struggle. Transformation is a mark of our faith. And it doesn't end when we say "yes" to Jesus. We are constantly transformed by God's grace. God's people are transformed people. That comes through struggle.

All of us struggle. We've struggled like Jacob – against a parent or sibling or friend. We've struggled like Jacob – with our own conscience when we've wronged someone or sinned against what God calls us to do and to be. We struggle to overcome

the worst in ourselves – our impatience with others and harsh words, our giving into temptations for temporary satisfaction, our pride that separates us from others.

As I've thought about the recent displays of hatred and racism around the country and here in our community, I've tried to be honest with myself about how my silence or ignorance contributes to the problem. Friends, whatever the struggle, I have to believe that God is with us as we try to live more in line with God's will for us and our world.

Our struggles with others and within ourselves are spiritual struggles. They test our faith and leave a mark. We have to look inside ourselves. We have to decide who we are and what that means for our relationships. We have to remember the struggles so that we can truly change for the better.

This week at our clergy family camp, our Bishop, David Bard, joined us and encouraged us to remember our baptismal vows that we lifted up last week. He told us to remember the call of Christ on our lives to love one another. He reminded us that we're connected to one another - all who seek to do God's will are a part of our family in Christ.

God told Jacob who Jacob could be. He went from Jacob – Grabber, Deceiver, Trickster – to Israel – one who struggled with God and come through. His struggle with God gave strength to struggle with others. But even with Jacob's new name, this struggle says something about our God.

After all that they've been through together, over so many years, God is the One who gives the blessing. God is the One who gets to our level – wherever we are. God is the One who will stay with us and struggle as long as it takes for us to understand who God is. God is the One who gives us life and the One who brings salvation and wholeness.

Our struggles are real. We may not know the depth of each other's struggles, but God knows them. And God offers us time and space for healing. Healing isn't instantaneous. Healing isn't without struggle. But turning our struggles over to God helps us. That's what Jacob did on this trip home. In the wrestling, he found hope and healing. He was marked by struggle. He was healed even though he came away with a limp. He eventually found reconciliation with Esau and was able to pass on the blessing.

We have past mistakes. We carry hurts. We struggle to have peace with our past so that we can live in the present and have hope for the future. We have questions for God that have no good answers. I've struggled with the reality of hate, racism, and bigotry this week. I've questioned my own feelings and thoughts - and the temptation to treat those who are different from me in a negative way. We know there are people

struggling with death. We know there are people struggling with “why?” We know people who wonder if anyone cares - or if God even cares.

But God uses our struggles to strengthen and guide us. God speaks to us through struggles and helps us connect to others. For how could we face them without God? Jacob struggled until something good came of it – the blessing. May we experience God’s blessing, too.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.