

Living Well in a Complex Age - Wrestling

Genesis 32 - Jacob and the Stranger

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Prayer

Let us pray.

Dear God, may the story of Jacob's wrestling become so ingrained in our lives so that its God-given way of leading us in the direction of your peace and beauty will be there for us when we need it. As we wrestle with this text, may we, like Jacob, emerge to face the new day ahead with a new name and a new blessing. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Introduction

Each year in the United States, many farmers face the blizzard season, and these farmers have learned the hard way that you never go out into an approaching storm unprepared – no, they always tie a strong rope around themselves and secure it inside their home, because once the downpour begins, there is no way of getting back home, except by following the rope back. Without the rope, the farmer will perish. Being in a blizzard is like snorkelling in white paint.

Modern life is just such a blizzard. And like the farmer, if we fail to secure ourselves with a rope, we will be lost in life's storms. Quite simply, you have to have a rope. I propose that these ancient scriptural stories are just such ropes. When we imagine ourselves as their bumbling-along characters, when we initiate ourselves into their grammar and language, when we immerse ourselves into their textured world, these God-breathed stories will accomplish their task of leading our storm-battered souls back home.¹

With terrorism, tornadoes, and tidal waves, what we hear often is that living well in this complex age is about staying indoors, and if you have to venture out, do so with suspicion. There are Closed Circuit Televisions everywhere.

God's people tell another story: living well is about skilfully navigating all conditions, the blizzards and the bliss, by learning how to follow trustingly God's word, fully revealed in Christ and as Christ, back to the home of one another's and God's embrace.

The story of Jacob wrestling through the night is one of Scripture's most potent stories, as it tells of Jacob's stormy encounter with a stranger who, like the farmer's rope, Jacob would not let go of.

So let's turn to Jacob and the Stranger, our rope-story for today. [Page 26 of the pew bible. THE NRSV begins the story at verse 22, but I prefer to start at verse 21. My translation differs in a few places from the NRSV]

Scene 1 – Genesis 32:21-24a

Scene 1a – Genesis 32:21-24a

*So the **gift**² **crossed over before Jacob's face**; and he himself spent that night in the camp. **And he arose in the night** and took his two wives, his two **slavegirls**, and his eleven children, and **crossed over the ford of the Jabbok**. He took them and **he made them cross over the stream**, and **he made** everything that he had **cross over**. And Jacob was left alone.*

Like many a good story, the beginning is crucial and here is no exception. Five words set the scene – gift, crossing over, face, night, alone.

Word One. Gift. The gift sets the context: Jacob has sent ahead a gift, more like a bribe, to his estranged brother Esau, whom he has not seen in decades. The storyteller is thus setting the story against the background of relationship discord. It is brimming with the anxiety of a hoped-for reconciliation, a fearful longing – “Will Esau accept me?” Jacob wonders. Gift.

The story begins with Jacob sending a gift in a hope to control that most unruly of things – human relationships. What else will Jacob, whose name means deceiver, Jacob, the ultimate control-freak, what else will he try to control in this story, as we already know he is someone who buys and talks and bargains his way out of trouble?

Word Two. Crossing Over. This verb is mentioned four times in scene 1. Here we are at a river, a boundary marker, and first the gift crosses over. We know from verse 14 that this gift includes 550 goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. Now that's a gift, and indicates just how worried Jacob is about pleasing Esau. Secondly his family crosses over. This is repeated, “he made them cross over.” And finally, everything he has crosses over.

Jacob is a stripped down to the bare essentials, namely, to nothing but himself. In the shadowy night to follow, nothing, not even his family, can accompany him on such a journey. The crossing over symbolises a removal of all that Jacob has acquired in life through trickery, lust, deception, – remember, his name, Jacob, means “deceiver” – and, admittedly, through years of hard work. Just think of Rachel and Leah. This is Jacob's

midlife crisis, where he parts with all that he has used to build his identity and to secure his place in the world, all of which won't matter in the coming tempest.

Word Three. Face. The gift crossed over before Jacob's *face*. He watched it go past as the sun was setting, before the blustery stranger arrives in the night. Was there a tightness of anxious worry in his brow? Or perhaps a shoulder-sagging resignation, as he realises the futility of all this stuff? And with all his material possessions gone, what new face might appear in the now-vacant space?

Word Four. Night. At this point, the lights go off. Night is the time of poor vision, the time of elevated fear, the time of compromised ability. Night is ripe with danger. And this night, we are to surmise, Jacob couldn't sleep. He gets up during the night, and sends all his worldly possessions across the river. It's as if he can't bear to be with anyone in his moment of suspenseful waiting. Jacob, like all of us, knows when he needs what my five-year old daughter Tayah calls PS – *personal space*. "Just leave me be!" Jacob pleads before a starry sky.

Word Five. Alone. "And Jacob was left alone." This word was last used of Adam, when God declared it was not good for the man to be alone, not wholesome, not right, not satisfying, not complete. And Jacob was left alone.

Jacob chose the isolation into which God appeared, but to some it comes unbeckoned – addictions, accidents, atrocious mistakes; think about what we saw this week in NSW politics, – they can all leave us so lonely we feel like we will seep away unnoticed like liquid into the ground. A loneliness no friend can penetrate, a loneliness of screaming silence. And Jacob was alone. The fifth and final word.

The narrator has once again set everything up beautifully. And he is telling us what to look out for, although the stormy text reduces our visibility somewhat:

Gift – Jacob has given one. Will he receive one?

Crossing over – everything except Jacob has crossed over. Will Jacob also cross over?

Face – Nothing now stands before Jacob's face. Will someone appear?

Night – His moment of greatest vulnerability. Will someone take advantage of him?

Alone – Our greatest fear. Who am I when the lights are out and all have left me?

Scene 2 – Genesis 32:24b-29

Scene 2a – 24b-25

And a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And the man saw that he did not prevail against him, and he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Unannounced, a protagonist appears on the scene whose identity is uncertain, but who turns out to be God. Isn't this exactly how we experience the divine – our suspicions are raised, we grope for clues; like Jacob, we often even ask outright, Is that you God? What's *your* name? – 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?'.³

This God-stranger wrestles with Jacob through the evening.⁴ Jacob did not decline this nocturnal struggle, rather, they grappled until dawn. They were, we realise, evenly matched. God is neither a bully nor a doormat. God meets us on our shadowy night at the level of our capacity to resist.

This is how powerful love looks: it's like a father wrestling with his son, adjusting his strength advantage to match his child's, and then taking the foot off the accelerator ever so slightly.

Yet here the mystery deepens, as the stranger cannot overcome Jacob, so he injures him, dislocating his hip in some way.

What will happen now in this dangerous fusion of skin-on-skin? Will Jacob give in?

Scene 2b – 26-30

And he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

And Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

And he said to him, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob."

And the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

And Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name."

And he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there.

Such a short conversation, yet, to put it mildly, such an astonishing conversation, without equal in all of sacred scripture. Let's consider it carefully.⁵

And the stranger said, "Let me go! For the day is breaking!" Jacob, who has let go of everything, has found something worth holding onto. Jacob has found himself in the fight of his life and he's not going to let this one get away.

So he screams at his opponent in their entanglement: *"I won't let you go until you bless me!"*. Until you *bless* me. All of Jacob's life is compressed into this one word: *blessing*. The blessing he stole from his brother was not one he even thought he needed, it was all his mother's idea. But he went ahead and stole it anyway, in the "darkness" of his father's blindness he received his first blessing. But this blessing, this is the blessing Jacob *wants* - darkness is still the context for blessing, but everything else is different. *Bless me! I won't let go until you bless me!*

Jacob realises that this stranger is not an ordinary man – he is God and rule number one is, don't let go of God if you have him in your grasp – what an opportunity of a lifetime! "I won't let you go until you bless me! *I've* figured out who you are and *I've* got the upper hand. You said so yourself when you revealed your weakness and said 'Let me go!'. That'll teach you, Mr God-posing-as-stranger, not to make yourself vulnerable to a person again."

I like to think of this as God's first trial go at Incarnation.

And so the God-man said something disarmingly simple, "What is your name?" ... "What is your name? Tell me who you are. You want a blessing, then you're going to have to tell me your name first. I don't want your list of assets, your IQ, your Myers-Briggs results, your blood-type. I don't want the church you attend, the salary you earn, the prizes you've won, the degrees you've earned, the people you've befriended, the mountains you've climbed, tell me your *name! WHO ARE YOU?*

And so then Jacob, like an obstinate arctic glacier that has finally accumulated enough snow and ice for it to reach a critical mass so it must begin to move, perhaps dimly aware that his accumulation of goods and wives and children and enemies and cheated blessings has also reached a critical mass, experiences likewise a cataclysmic shift in his internal geography. The reason? *Jacob has heard this question before!* Decades ago, at his dying father's side, dressed up as his brother to deceive, his father asked him, "*Who are you, my son?*" (Gen 27:18) and Jacob the deceiver deceitfully answered "Esau!" And so now, just when he thought he was going to win the Ancient Near East spiritual lotto, everything

comes crashing down with, *What is your name?* And he said, Jacob. Deceiver. I am Jacob. I am the deceiver.

To receive the blessing he longs for, Jacob must admit finally who he is. Jacob must finally face his broken self.

And then the blessing comes: “Your name shall be Israel, for you have struggled with God and people and have prevailed.” We think we know what blessing is, don’t we! God blesses us when we get things, when we receive gifts, when we acquire goods. Blessing is all about *stuff*, stuff God gives us. But here we are, in the one story that determines definitively the true meaning of blessing, and guess what, all the possessions in the world are on the other side of the river. True blessing, we learn, is not about getting things, getting better, getting ahead; no, to bless someone *is to reveal their true nature*.

Blessing is about discovering who we are and who we are to become.⁶ Full stop. Throw away the party tricks, the grand promises of Christian leaders enticing you with the blessed life, the blessed this and that. You want blessing? You *really* want it? *Then go alone to the darkest night of the soul where God will whisper your true name in a wounding embrace.*

If I was Jacob, I’d be pretty well satisfied at this point. In fact, I’d be *rushing* across the river – it’s not every day you get a new name after wrestling with God!

But incredibly, the conversation continues. Jacob, God bless him (!), wants more; Jacob wants to upsize this spiritual meal-deal. “Please tell me your name!”. Jacob, like Peter’s booth-making on the Mount of Transfiguration,⁷ wants to capture the moment forever by getting a handle on the divine, “Please tell me your name!” He wants some secret knowledge about God, able to be invoked in future bouts, some name that, like a genie in a bottle, will force God to appear on Jacob’s terms at Jacob’s time and place of choosing.

But the God-stranger replies, “Why do you ask for my name?” – which is polite God-talk for, “Sorry, Jacob, but no cigar!” And so God blessed him there. Jacob didn’t receive any *thing*, but he did receive a new name and a limp. The limp is a new way of being in the world, a new way of being recognised, of journeying, a reminder of his brokenness. Jacob’s lonely struggle that one long evening is converted into a lifelong struggle in his walking. That’s what might just happen when God blesses us. You have been warned!

The conversation ends here, but the story continues – let’s see if it too contains any more “blessings” for the patient reader.

Scene 3 – 32:30-33

So Jacob called the place Peniel (Face-of-God), saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he crossed over Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore 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.

Jacob, who has just had a name change, changes the name of the place from Jabbok to Peniel, which means “the face of God.” It is as though the transformative forces released in Jacob’s life flow into his surroundings – he gains a new name, a new way of being, and a new place. Jacob and the place *look* the same to the outsider, but to Jacob, everything has changed.

Our craft storyteller is up to his tricks again. He weaves together three strands:

First, he repeats here the word *cross over*, for the fifth and final time: “Jacob crossed over Penuel limping”. Jacob finally crosses over.

Secondly, he adds another allusion to Adam, from whom God took a rib *tsela`* to make him whole. Jacob, on whom God inflicts a limp *tsala`*, to make him whole. Rib *tsela`*. Limp *tsala`*. The words are related.⁸ We are made whole when God touches us.

Thirdly, we see that our five words meet again here in the conclusion, each transformed: gift, face, crossing over, night, alone.

Jacob’s strings-attached *gift*, replaced by God’s free gift of blessing.

Jacob’s *face* in front of which all his life passed, replaced by God’s face, up close and personal.

Jacob’s lack of *crossing over*, replaced by his crossing over to the waiting community.

Jacob’s *night*, replaced by the new day.

Jacob’s *aloneness*, replaced by a divine enveloping.

To this list, five more transformations can be added:

Jacob’s *name*, Deceiver, replaced by Israel, God-Wrestler.

Jacob’s *place*, Jabbok, replaced by Peniel, God’s presence.

Jacob's confident *stride*, replaced by a cautious limp.

Jacob's relentless *grip* on the stranger, replaced by a letting-go of the unknowable.

Jacob's life-sapping worldly *possessions*, replaced by life-giving blessing.

The point is clear – when we enter the brawling darkness of our unyielding grapple with God, watch out, because everything might change.

And then, the story ends in typical Old Testament style – back to daily life of eating and childbirth, olive trees and threshing floors. But don't be deceived by the simplicity, or what is to us the obscurity of eating, for there is a profound theological point in this final verse – eating with friends and wrestling with strangers belong together. Jesus' parables of Kingdom banquets, manna in the wilderness, the widow's oil, the last supper, bread and wine, body and blood – the connection is undeniable – eating well is high on God's agenda. Jews have dietary laws to protect this connection between the mundane and the sacred, a connection we ignore at their peril.

The meal is the most complex social event we participate in. The meal is the primary location for the formation of communion, relationship, conversation. Our mealtimes together say a lot about our theology.

The narrative point is here for the taking – do not trivialise or remove God from the engine room of our daily life, our holy meals together. Eating with friends and wrestling with strangers – separate them at your own risk.

On this point, our story ends.

Concluding Reflection

The story of Jacob and the Stranger, I suggested in the introduction, is like a rope we can secure to very selves to help us find our way home in life's blizzards. I want to finish with two reflections, to shed more light on this very remarkable, very short story.

This story, profound though it is for the individual life of faith, is not just about that, because *Israel* is the very name of the people of God. That is, this story reveals to us who *we* are, as the people of God: we are a people who struggle with God and with whom God struggles. God and struggle – whatever else we say about the church, we must keep these two at the forefront.

There are no short-cuts here. No bumper-stickers. No microwave Christianity, where you just add water and press Start. No McScriptures or McChurch, which only produces McChristians with McFaith. Some of us, despite our faith in God, are living poorly in this complex world because we are living the deceived short-cut life of Jacob and not the wrestling get-your-hands-dirty life of Israel.

To live well in a complex age is to accept that our life of faith together involves long, strenuous, lonely, dark – *and* – *transforming* struggles. Look no further than Paul, who shortly after the Road to Damascus, was told by God, “I myself will show him that he must *suffer* for my sake.” Or Jesus, who didn’t say, “Take up your mobile phones and text me!” but “Take up your *cross* and follow me!”

I don’t know about you, but that’s a tremendous relief. What we hear all too often these days, is something more like, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, Deceiver, but, Mr and Mrs Prosperous, Mr and Mrs Successful”

Who talked us out of our true identity before God? No wonder we live so poorly in our complex age, because we *imagine* ourselves so poorly. We think God is like every other dealer in the religious marketplace, offering hazard-free bliss for all and sundry! But that’s a lie - the people of God emerges from a blessing in which our true identity is revealed as those who struggle. The most important story in the Old Testament scriptures about who we are together is steeped in mystery, bristling with conflict, and saturated by blood, sweat, and tears. *This* is who we are.

Finally, for me, the most profound insight that this story offers for the life of faith comes from Jacob’s question in the centre of the story: *Tell me your name. Tell me who you are. I have a question that I want you to answer.* But God never answers the question. What must have happened at that point is that *Jacob let go*, because we know the stranger could not get free of his grip. What we have here, in the centre of Jacob’s struggle with God, is a question unanswered, followed by a letting go of God and so a letting go of our need for an answer. That’s when the blessing came.

At the heart of every person’s life of faith is an unanswered question.

At the heart of every person’s life of faith is an unanswered question. What is yours?

- why does God allow so much mindless brutality and suffering?
- what will happen to my loved ones who reject God?
- why do I have to suffer this incurable disease?

- why did those who were supposed to love and nurture me fail to do so?
- why do I look and feel and love and desire the way I do?
- why did someone I loved so dearly have to die?
- why has my deepest desire in the world not been granted?

At the heart of every person's life of faith is an unanswered question.

And the new day of God's blessing will come when we let go, accepting that God will not surrender its secret answer.

There are no certainties in the life of faith – sometimes a question surrendered today will be answered tomorrow, sometimes the struggle remains till death. But each time you plunge into that place of isolating despair and come face to face with your Maker, don't let go until you've confessed who you are, heard your name, and been touched by God. Don't let go until you have asked your deepest question and waited for an answer that may not come. And then, when you are ready, let go, let go, let go, for the night is ending and blessing will come.

I finish with a prayer about Jacob's wrestling, a prayer to help us to live well in this complex age:

A separation, a darkness, a solitary place.
 A struggle, a wounding, a slowing down.
 A confession, a naming, an aching question.
 A silence.
 A letting go, a crossing over, a moving on.
 A new day, a new blessing.

Amen.

Notes

- ¹ The blizzard and rope image is adapted from Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*. (2004).
- ² NRSV: present
- ³ Matthew 25:37. Also, 'Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13:2). Perhaps we should be wary of anyone who can identify God in our midst too readily.
- ⁴ The word wrestle is *'aveq* - so we have *Ya'aqov* at the river *Yabboq*, *'aveqqing* a stranger. And in the next chapter Esau will *chavaq* "embrace" Jacob! Yet another narrator's clue: names, places, and actions are linked together in mysterious ways in this story, as they are in life.
- ⁵ Kass, *The beginning of wisdom*, p. 456, writes, "We, like the hero Jacob are in the dark about the identity of his opponent, the reason for his attack, the nature of the wound, the significance of the outcome, the meaning of Jacob's new name, and the importance of the story for the rest of Jacob's life - and for his people Israel. At no point in the entire Jacob saga are we in more need of careful interpretation and searching reflection".
- ⁶ Which is why the scriptures often say, "Bless the Lord!". In blessing God, we reveal who God truly is.
- ⁷ Matthew 17:4.
- ⁸ With most things Hebrew, this relation at a *linguistic* level cannot be proven beyond all doubt, but the *literary* allusion I think between Jacob and Adam is undeniable.