

# Throwing Down

*Luke 18:1-8; Genesis 32:22-31*

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 20, 2019

In July of 2005, when I was 2/3<sup>rds</sup> of the way through my seminary studies and also serving full time as one of the pastors of the Mountville Church of the Brethren in Pennsylvania, the Genesis text that was just read came up in the Lectionary on my week to preach and plan worship. I chose it as my focus text, as it was already a story with which I resonated greatly, and had for some time. In planning worship, I thought it would be a great opportunity to invite those in the congregation to share testimonies of their own times of struggle – times that they wrestled with faith, with doubt, with God. Little did I know that in just over a month, I myself would be entering one of the hardest and most trying times of my life, a season of struggle and heartache and doubt that would last well over two years, and eventually be part of what called me into ministry here in Bridgewater. In those two years, this story of Jacob's wrestling match with God went from being merely a favorite of mine, to being my life text. With no small amount of irony, it was the featured scripture for my service of ordination, and would be revealed to be both summary and foreshadowing of my ministerial journey.

Today, I find myself in an eerily similar place of struggle in my spiritual life. Most of you know the health issues that have dogged my family, both immediate and extended, in recent months. Many of you are aware of the vocational and ministerial turmoil in which I have existed for the past few years, and are perceptive enough to recognize the intensification of that turmoil that has been brought on by our pastoral transition. Some of you are privileged to know some of my most personal struggles and doubts. None of you know the fullness of my spiritual unrest.

We don't talk about that kind of stuff much in the church. It isn't easy to share those things which we hold deepest and guard most tenaciously in our hearts...those things that have tried us, challenged us, wounded us, and as such shaped us into the people we are today. And too often in the church, we present only the softer, gentler side of our faith experiences. We love to tell of the God who watches over us and protects us from harm, whose eye is on the sparrow – the God who has plans for us to prosper and succeed and be all that we can be. We love to tell the story of the Jesus who stands at the door and knocks, waiting patiently for us to invite him into our lives; the Jesus who welcomes the little children; the Good Shepherd who protects his sheep from harm and passionately seeks out the lost. We love to sing of our precious Lord, who takes us by the hand and helps us to stand, who accepts me just as I am, and whose amazing grace finds and saves what was once lost.

All good. There is nothing at all wrong with these divine images. They've provided comfort and assurance for people of faith for countless generations. They are biblically sound, and unquestioningly powerful. But they are not the only images we have or know of God. And unfortunately we have favored these types of God images to the exclusion of some other images of God that we quite frankly just don't like as much. Yet this neglect comes at a cost. Because in a church culture in which all we talk about is a sweet Jesus, meek and mild, or a benevolent creator and sustainer of all things bright and beautiful, there isn't much room for a person like me right now – someone who has experienced and lives with other, more challenging and more disturbing sides of the divine. I am banking that I am not the only one here this morning who knows what I am talking about.

But let's be honest – none of us are eager to experience God in these ways. Life is hard enough without adding a mysterious and unpredictable God into the mix. We have little desire for a God who provokes us to change, who assaults our sense of right and wrong, or who presents obstacles in the path of our life and faith. And though we talk a lot about taking up our cross and following Jesus, in truth, most of us really just want to skip the cross and join up with Jesus in the resurrection. And who could blame us? These are the faces of God that confront us in times of trouble, in times of doubt, in times of despair, in times of change. These are the sides of God with which we struggle, that keep us up all through the night wrestling with doubt, that push us to question our faith and make sense of evil and suffering in light of an omnipotent but seemingly inactive God. These just aren't experiences that are on our wish list when we come to worship on Sunday morning, or sit down for our morning devotions, or lay our heads down and pray before we drift off to sleep

Most of you know that I am a big fan of satire, and one of my favorite satirical images of Jesus is from the movie *Dogma*, in which the Catholic church launches a new campaign in an effort to brighten up its image and be more attractive to contemporary people. In the process, they decide to do away with the disturbing crucifix as the central symbol of the church, and unveil instead a new, more welcoming image of Jesus – the “Buddy Christ” – a smiling, winking, thumbs-up kind of Jesus. Indeed, much more welcoming than a bloody image of a dying man on a cross.

But as we know, Jesus wasn't all hugs and smiles. Sure, he said “blessed are the meek”, but he also said “blessed are you when you are persecuted for my sake.” Yes, he said “let the little children come unto me”, but he also said, “Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Indeed, he said, “I am the resurrection and the life”, but he also said, “Let the dead bury the dead.” From the same mouth that uttered, “Peace be with you,” came the words “I came not to bring peace, but a sword.” The one who came so that “they might have life, and have it abundantly,” demanded his followers to deny themselves in order to follow him.

These sayings of Jesus are hard to swallow, and they make us struggle with the meaning of being a disciple. But the tension present in the teachings of Jesus is nothing new. If anything, the Hebrew scriptures that informed Jesus presents God in an even more ambiguous light. The same God who created all of life out of nothing, who heard the cries of the oppressed Israelites and led them to freedom, who sustained the exiled Jews through the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the temple – this same God actually appears at numerous times throughout the Hebrew scriptures as an *adversary* of his people – even to the point of attacking them. For example – in Exodus 4, as Moses is following God's instructions to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, we are told quite bluntly in verse 24 that “the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him.” And in the book of Numbers, chapter 22, God sends an angel with sword to confront Balaam while he was on his way to do what God had told him to do, and he was saved only by his mysteriously helpful and chatty donkey. Or in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 24, God punishes David for conducting a census of Israel, even though it was God who had earlier incited David to do just that.

In none of these stories was God attacking someone who was in rebellion or mutiny, or who was being punished for their sinfulness. These were not enemies of God – rather, they were people either actively trying to do God's will or who were at the very least expected to play a crucial role in passing on the divine covenant. But none of these stories can compare to the confrontation Jacob had with God at Peniel. It is one of the most scrutinized passages in the Judeo-Christian tradition – a favorite passage for scholarly commentary and artistic subject matter. After all, it is from this story that Israel takes its name.

Here appears Jacob, a rather shady fellow to be a patriarch of faith. His very name hinted at a questionable character. From birth Jacob had been a fighter...even while still in the womb, he struggled with his twin brother Esau, and when they were born, Jacob emerged clutching onto his brother's heel, so they gave him a name that meant something like "Grabber" or "Trickster" or even plain old "Heel". It was a name that would prove rather descriptive of Jacob in his early years. When they were young men, Jacob duped Esau into forfeiting his birthright for a bowl of Jacob's stew. And while their father lay dying, Jacob conned the old man into giving him, not Esau, his blessing and the family inheritance. Esau was understandably infuriated by this, even ready to kill Jacob for it, and Jacob had been on the run ever since. Now after many years away, he is coming home. But Esau is coming out to meet him, and he has recruited an army just for this moment. Looks to be the makings of a bloody family reunion.

So Jacob sends gifts ahead of him to try to appease his brother, and soften his anger. Goats and sheep, camels, cows and donkeys all sent with messengers explaining that they were a present from his brother Jacob. Then Jacob makes camp for the evening, but decides to send his wives and children on ahead of him across the river, and he is left alone for the night. Maybe he needed some time to be alone to think and pray. Or maybe he was worried that he would be attacked in the middle of the night and wanted to protect his family. If that was the case, it was a good move, because that is exactly what happened. Details are scant in telling the events of that night. No build-up, no drama, no details – simply one sentence: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."<sup>1</sup>

Who was this mysterious stranger with whom Jacob struggled? Was it Esau, finally able to get his hands on his conniving twin brother? Was it a thief or a bandit, and Jacob an unfortunate victim? Or was it an evil spirit, antagonizing a man with a less than clear conscience?

Whatever his identity, Jacob wrestled with the night visitor all night long. The scripture indicates that it was an even match, with neither wrestler able to gain a clear advantage. Near daybreak, with Jacob suffering the pain of a hip socket knocked out of joint and surely exhausted from the all-night struggle, they exchange some words. "Let me go," says the stranger. Always the "Grabber", Jacob refuses. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." "What's your name?" the stranger asks. "Jacob." "Not anymore," the stranger says. You will now be called Israel, for you have struggled with God and people and have prevailed." "So what's your name?" Jacob asks. No response. The stranger gives no answer, but does give him a blessing before he departs.

But at the end of that eventful night, Jacob is convinced that he had just fought with God. Not a god, but *the* God. Fresh with a new name – Israel – Jacob renamed the place Peniel, meaning "the face of God", saying, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

So to recap – here's the trickster Jacob, preparing for a fateful and fearful encounter with his wronged brother and his army. If ever there was a time Jacob needed some inner peace and divine comfort, it was then. I can't imagine that Jacob was not struggling *before* he was knocked off his feet by that stranger in the night. But Jacob's God is no kind old gentleman in the sky. Just when you'd think that Jacob was most in need of comfort, support, and encouragement, his God delivers something else Jacob apparently needed – namely a good kick in the butt. So God jumps him in the middle of the night, and tries to wrestle him into

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 32:24

submission. But Jacob doesn't give up easily, and even with a dislocated hip, he hangs on for dear life and demands a blessing from his attacker.

So here is my question – is it worth it? Is it worth throwing down with God? Jacob certainly had to have asked himself that question before that night. Was it worth Esau's anger to have stolen not only his birthright, but also their father's blessing and inheritance? Were these worth having to flee his home and family, running away from a brother looking for righteous revenge? Was it worth it for Jacob to have betrayed his father to get what he wanted? Were the wives and the children and the flocks and the servants that he now enjoyed worth the 20 years he had spent serving his uncle Laban, who was beginning to turn on him as well?

As I read Jacob's story, it seems to me that our scripture this morning begins at one of the lowest and most trying moments of his life. Perhaps like me, you can resonate with that moment in Jacob's life – that moment when he watched his whole life – everything he had worked for and strived for and given everything he had for – cross over the Jabbok, leaving him alone. Perhaps like me, you find a kindred soul in this Jacob – alone with his thoughts, looking back on all the struggle that had brought him to that crossing, looking ahead to the struggle that surely awaited him with his brother, wondering if it was all worth it and if it would ever end. Perhaps like me, you feel like you actually get Jacob, maybe more than most other characters in our usual bible stories, and you can imagine the kinds of thoughts and emotions that were running through his heart and mind that night. Perhaps like me, you know intimately what it means to hear the opening words of our gospel text – “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart...” and hearing it, realize that you already have, or at least are in danger of doing so.

If you are like me in any of these ways, then perhaps you are also like me in not finding much good news in today's gospel text. I don't resonate with the persistent widow in Jesus' parable. I don't read myself in her story. And if my faith were to be judged by whether or not I have ever lost heart, well, then I have very little faith. Losing heart is practically my daily bread.

But Jacob – Israel – him I get. Bloodied and beaten, exhausted and weary, wounded and limping, having struggled through the night with God-knows who or what – yet not letting go. Jacob very well may have lost heart, but God wasn't about to let him go quietly in the night. And when God threw down the gauntlet, challenging Jacob with an attack that one commentator called a “let's-see-what-this-guy's-made-of-when-the-going-really-gets-tough”<sup>2</sup> move, Jacob proved his mettle – enduring, holding on, refusing to yield, and in the process, receiving divine blessing.

So was it worth throwing down with God? Was it worth the energy and emotion spent? Was it worth exhausting himself before his meeting with Esau? Was it worth the pain from the wound that would linger in his hip the rest of his life? Was the blessing of this stranger really worth fighting for?

In retrospect, it most certainly was. The way that Jacob responded in this moment of deep and divine challenge laid the foundation for the future of his family and of the people that would come to bear his new name. The new name that Jacob was given that night – Israel – means something like “one who struggles with God.” And if faith is to be judged by endurance – holding on through thick and thin, struggle and pain, through the dark night of both soul and body – then Israel, both the man and the people, pass the test. Those who claim faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are those who are willing to throw down with God – those

---

<sup>2</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 1. p. 568.

who have faced God, been gripped by God, prevailed against God, been wounded by God, gained a blessing from God, been renamed by God.

You know I imagine that there are times God has also asked, "Is it worth it?" Is it worth fighting for these people who so easily forget the promises we have made to one another? Is it worth fighting against this blockhead Jacob who will do anything to get a blessing from all the wrong people? Is it worth the fight that it will take to see these people through to the end?

Our story this morning continues, I believe, because God has decided that, yes, these people are worth the struggle. It's worth fighting for them, and if necessary, it's worth fighting against them. And so God comes close enough to us to grip us, to challenge us, to wrestle and struggle with us if necessary.

We may not always want or like a God who is willing to confront us and to challenge us. We may not take much comfort in the God who wrestles with us deep into the night, who makes us struggle with the deepest parts of ourselves, who through Jesus demands that we deny ourselves. But when it comes to struggles in our lives, "we can count on God's mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, evaluating us, judging us...God honors the relationship both by engaging in the struggle in the first place and by persisting in that struggle through thick and thin."<sup>3</sup> And in so doing, God may kindle a new direction for thought and action.

But one thing is for sure ... this God with whom we are throwing down is undeniably close to us. And so when the sun rises on our wounded forms, like Jacob, may we be blessed when we realize that in our struggle, we have come face to face with God...and we're still here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 1. p. 570.