

## Genesis 32: 22-32

### Jacob Wrestles

What kind of limp do you have?

What kind of limp?

Jacob wrestled all night with the night visitor

and in the morning, as the sun rose, he limped as a result of that struggle.

When the sun rises on you....

when the day is not yet full

and the light is just beginning, and new,

when the sun's rays are slanted still, enough to reveal your pain

and in those in-between times, no longer night, not yet day

and when you have not had time to assume the mask for the day, or shake off the terrors of the night,

and when no one is there to watch you walk,

how do you limp??

Do you know what I mean?

This is marvellous stuff. Deep. Primal, somehow.

Multi-layered...disturbing....yet beckoning with hope.

This is an incredible piece of scripture. And I would never presume to stand here and tell you what it means.

That would be to overestimate myself, to underestimate you, and to profoundly misunderstand the task of preaching, the nature of scripture, and the power of God.

It is not for me to tell you what it means....but rather, to invite you to come to this text – hold it up so that we can encounter it and it can encounter us....

perhaps we will wrestle it out, this text and us, and in the wrestling, receive a blessing.

*“The same night, he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his 11 children, and crossed the ford of the Jabokk.*

*He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise, everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

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

*Then he said “let me go, for the day is breaking” but Jacob said “I will not let you go, unless you bless me”.*

*So he said to him “what is your name?” And he said “Jacob”. Then the man said “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*

*Then Jacob asked him “Please tell me your name”*

*But he said “Why is it that you ask my name?” and there he blessed him.*

*So Jacob called that place Peniel, saying “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved”*

*The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, 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.*

You know about limping – about the wounds that come from living. The broken dreams, the broken hearts, the disappointment.

I don't have to tell you what it is to limp.

As you have wrestled with life; your own life, and the great mystery of Life with a capital L you have not escaped unhurt, unwounded – and those hurts affect the way you walk.

The way you move, and when you don't move,

the way you get from place to place

If those of us who have eyes to see....

if we watched you closely as you walk through your life,

we could see you limping.

The places in your life where you make a quick step to avoid pain, the tender spots, the sudden and unexpected wince....

the places where you rest most of your weight on one foot, and very little on the other – the imbalances,

Yes, I think if we watched carefully how and where you walk through your life, we could detect the places you've been wounded.

Think about that for just a minute.

Think about the ways that you've been hurt – perhaps very deeply and personally and probably very private. Do you think that even though we don't know about those things, do you think we could guess, from how you live your life? Do you have some kind of a limp that gives you away?

The question is not really whether we have a limp

all of us in some way have been hurt

and whether or not we know it, these hurts show up in how we live.

A limp.

It's ok....and one of the things we need to learn to do is recognize them for what they are, in ourselves and in other people.

And learn to be gentle and kind with each other when it comes to those places.

Try thinking about people who are close to you....someone you love, or a good friend....

what parts of their personalities are hard for you, or confusing...and is it possible that it's a limp you're seeing? The result of having been hurt in some way?

And if so, does seeing it as a limp make any difference in how you look at them?

What about people you have trouble getting along with? Think of the thing that bothers you the most.

Is that a limp? Have they been wounded in a way that makes them walk that way? I don't know...I'm just asking.

The question is not whether we have a limp

but what kind.

Jacob wrestled all night and would not let his opponent go until he received a blessing.

How is it that you can receive a blessing – force that...that...whatever it is – the hurt, the struggle, the pain....how can you hang on until you have received from it a blessing?

So that you will still limp, but the limping will be a change in your life that will in some way be a blessing to you and to others?

There's another layer to this text:

The scripture simply says that this night visitor was “a man” - not an angel, not God, - a man. But clearly as the writer goes on, clearly we are to understand this to be God, or at the very least, a divine messenger.

The visitor said “*You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed.*”

And Jacob himself understands it that way at the end, naming the place Peniel, meaning “I have seen God face to face and yet I live”

How does that image seem to you for a relationship with God? Jacob and this figure, wrestling all night until the sun began to rise....

let's be clear too about the verb....it means an intense struggle. Have you watched Olympic wrestlers at all? It takes everything you have to engage in a struggle like that.

Jacob and God

You and God

Does that image in any way resonate with your experience of God? Your living of the faith? Have you struggled with God? Wrestled with your faith? With a question, or a doubt or the Spirit of God who just would NOT leave you alone?

If this does not describe your experience, that's ok. Perhaps some day it will – perhaps not. Many people, though, have gone through this wrestling time. If you have, I needn't say more. Only this: Don't stop. Hold on. Hold on for your blessing.

Let me be really clear here: Let me be clear about what I am NOT saying – if you are in a situation where you are in danger, where you are being hurt or abused or where you are being destroyed emotionally, physically, spiritually....GET OUT. I am NOT saying that to hold on for your blessing means staying in a dangerous situation. Rather, that this, whatever it is, need not be the final word. It does not need to define you or control you or dictate your life from now on. The blessing will be to prevail over it and to live. Healthy, whole, free. Wounded but still whole.

This is a picture of a faithful life – one who struggles with God – wrestles with deep questions and with unseen presences in the night. And this is a picture of our faithful God – One who invites us to the struggle. God is not hurt by our wrestling, our asking questions, our struggles. God is there, wrestling with us; right there when horrible things happen and the future is uncertain – right here beside us, saying “let's wrestle this out together, you and I”.

and somehow,

through the struggle,

you discover that God IS right there with you

that God is not the one who curses you or crushes you

but God is the One who strives with you and blesses you

Not a tyrant God, or an indifferent God who put the world together and sits now on the sidelines watching while we fumble around on the playing field

God is right there with us – in the game – getting dirty with us as it were, and ready to keep on blessing and loving us in spite of our poor plays and feeble players.

We get hurt, yes we do.

None of us is equal to the struggle

and so we suffer crushed hopes and broken ideals and bruised hearts....

but we keep on anyway....limping  
and we hold on for the blessing that comes from knowing that we have done the best we could at any given time, and that God knows the struggle too.  
And the blessing that comes from knowing that God's love and blessing come in the midst of the struggle and are not dependent on whether we win, or how good we are  
but depends only on the grace of the One who blesses even as we grapple together.

My prayer for you this morning is that  
    you will recognize the One with whom you struggle when nights are dark  
    that you will wrestle hard, and faithfully  
    that you will hold on for your blessing  
    that you will honour your limping and the limping of others  
    and that you will rejoice and praise God, who by grace struggles with us and beside us and who,  
in the struggle, leads us home.  
Amen.