

Genesis 32 – Intro

BEFORE THE READING

We've been following the lives and struggles of this family for weeks now. Jacob is the third in the line of them. Sarah and Abraham, then Isaac and Rebecca, and now Jacob. With Bilah, Leah, Rachel and Zilpah – now they are the unlikely and unconventional family who will carry on.

We've seen Jacob the grabber

Grow up. He's been grabbing things all his life. His twin brother, Esau's heel, as they were being born. Then his brother Esau's birthright and then his brother Esau's blessing
And for his grabbing, his brother Esau threatened to kill him.
He fled. For his life.

It's now 20 years later. He is a wealthy man. He's a successful man – depending on how you define that.

Is he a happy man?

He's on his way home, led by an inner compulsion. To make things right? We don't know but he's going home. Is his brother Esau had threatened to kill him all those years ago. What will happen?

The drive to go home must have been overwhelming to make him risk it. Risk his own life and the lives of his wives and children, servants, animals...

Listen to the account.

LINDA AND I READ THE STORY

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.

This image.....Jacob alone at night

the sudden appearance of.....who WAS that anyway?

The struggle, the wrestling match – ALL NIGHT they wrestled....

Then

the naming, the wounding, the blessing

all in the half light of a night time desert sky,

we see the whole thing by the peculiar, partial light of the moon

and obscured by clouds that cover it

and obscured too, it seems to me, by the intent of the narrator, who is not concerned at all that we see what's really happening. It's better left in the dark. Daylightdoes things to nighttime truths.

this is one of the classic images for the imagination of artists
and the soul searching of people who struggle in the darkness
and wrestle with forces that demand we say our names

this is SO GOOD.

It smellsancient, this text. And it is.

It has all the features of a classic, archetypal
universal truth. It's thick and dense,
it's a passage

that rings true even as its articulation escapes us – evaporating like the dew, with the break of dawn.
It smells like foreign spices and desert sands and the human sweat of a death struggle
and it smells like home.

We know this story. We kind of ARE this story. It's a good thing it's at night because I don't know if
we could bear to watch it in the full light of day.

The narrator can't stand it either – and takes only one verse for a death struggle....Jacob didn't know if
he would live or die....they wrestled all night.....ALL NIGHT.

Like a bad dream. And the narrator tells that in one verse. The economy of words tells you something
big has just happened.

And as dream theory and as the tellers of good stories all over the world know
one way to look at it is that each part of this story is part of us.

Where to take it for our purposes today?

One sermon begging to be preached is this:

This midnight wrestling match is a pitch perfect picture of our society right now.
We are struggling – we're in a wrestle to the death match - with ourselves.

2020 so far has brought outrageous wildfires in Australia, flooding elsewhere, then, a global pandemic,
followed for good measure by

murder hornets

just for starters. Then, the death of George Floyd forced us to see what we have been steadfastly been
refusing, denying

and we're in a struggle with ourselves. Who are we as a human race and how did we get to be this
way?

We're wrestling with a part of ourselves and our history that we have never seriously acknowledged.

Yesterday August 1st is the anniversary of the day in 1834 that slavery in Canada was abolished.

And we know – now – that the shameful treatment of people of colour is not just an issue in other
countries. We know – now - the history of colonization that forms and informs our inner beings, our
institutions and relations between settlers and first nations

We're wrestling with a part of ourselves and our history: with complicity and cowardice and dualism and materialism that are killing people and the planet.

That's us on the ground, sweating and limping and being asked to say our name. Who we really are. That's us.

As much as I would like to continue on that theme, I don't believe I can do it justice today.

I'm going to a more personal, individual look at the text now....and will leave the rest of this track to your own prayerful consideration.

I want to talk about that limp. Remember – it says that after that struggle was all over, after the day broke and Jacob was alone again, he went on his way, limping because of his hip.

Limping.

Have you noticed that people are pretty sick of the pandemic? And one of the things that is happening is that we're more raw inside than we are when we have other things to distract us. We're noticing the things in our homes that need fixing

And the things in our lives that need fixing

Because we're stuck at home and we have time to notice.

And it's not all that pretty, and

Well...we're limping. Our wounds are showing.

And I think it's a revealing, a pulling away of the veil, a judgement, an invitation.....to look at ourselves deeply.

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.

You know about limping – about the wounds that come from living. The broken dreams that never quite healed.... 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 in the world.

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 TV 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 there 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.