

SERMON TITLE- "Wrestling With God"

TEXT- Genesis 32:22-32

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week we looked at Jacob in our journey through Genesis. Jacob's story takes up a large piece of Genesis. In fact I think it is fair to say that Jacob is one of a small handful of primary Biblical characters.

Many of these primary characters fill a role that people who study literature call- "Everyman." This is a character whose life and actions follow a pattern that is in some ways representative of how human beings act in the course of life.

Job, as he faces the trials of calamity is an "everyman." When David repents and still stumbles his way through life, he is an "everyman." When Peter tries to follow Jesus and yet his frailty also follows along, he is an "everyman."

In each story of an "everyman" we are to learn both from what they do well- but also from their stumbles and bumbles. Jacob, as we watch his actions described in the Book of Genesis is and "everyman."

Last week, we looked at the story of Jacob's vision of a stairway to heaven. There was Jacob, running away from a very angry brother, sleeping on a rock beside the road and in that moment of crisis he has a vision of God. That vision gave Jacob God's promise- a promise that reflects God's promise to His people.

In my opinion, that vision and call from God is what God offers all people. That is especially true of Jesus' message of Good News, which reminds each of us that God wants to walk with us on that long and winding road that represents life.

BUT at the heart of that story is saying "Yes" to God. This is God's offer- but we have to make it ours. Jacob did this- even if he found a way to be Jacob the Deal Maker, even in God's gracious offer.

With Jacob's response- as mixed with human reality as it was- God continued to work. That is very Good News for all of us whose human responses to God continue to fall lower than the standards we know to be right.

Today we pick up the story of Jacob at least 20 years later. Jacob left home, fleeing his brother's anger on the way to his mother's family home in Haran. Once there he went into the employ of his uncle, Laban. During the next 20 years Jacob became a wealthy man and acquired not just huge flocks of animals but 2 wives and a dozen children.

Being a wheeler-dealer Jacob's welcome expired at Laban's farm, and he decided to head back home to Canaan- so off he went. Again there is a longer story behind this journey but you will have to read that on your own.

What happens next come out of the context set in the beginning of chapter 32. A whole scene that leads to today's story is set up with this interesting verse-

Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim. Genesis 32:1-2

If you read the story you will find that this is the very next thing we are told after Jacob leaves Haran and Laban. We are told nothing of the journey that was probably in the order of 400 miles. In this story Jacob leaves Haran and next we see him on the edge of Canaan.

And now we meet angels again.

The word "angel" in the Bible is most often associated with "messenger." In the NT this is a synonymous word but even on the OT it is very clear that when God's people get direction from God it sometimes comes in the form of angels who visit people.

Last week Jacob, while sleeping on his rock has seen a vision of angels ascending and descending from heaven on a ladder.

Now on the way home- the angels of God meet Jacob again. At this point there is not mention of what they are saying to him. In fact their message seems to be missing- but let's look back at order of the narrative.

Going back home meant facing a problem that he had run away to escape- his angry brother Esau. There was no way to avoid meeting Esau again. Jacob as he approached Canaan, sends a message to Esau that he is heading back and sure enough the messengers come back telling Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him with a small army of 400 men. The situation definitely has a sense of foreboding about it.

In fact, the very next thing that is recorded after Jacob meets the angels is this-

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my master Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.' "
Genesis 32:3-5

It is immediately after meeting the angels that Jacob makes plans to meet with Esau. Did the angels have something to do with this? Did God's messengers tell/remind Jacob that he needed to think about meeting his brother Esau again? We don't know. All we can say is- Jacob now makes a plan to contact Esau.

We take up today's visit with Jacob as he prepares to meet Esau. Jacob has taken all the precautions he knows how to make. He has divided up his belongings into 2 parties. He has sent a peace delegation ahead.

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. Genesis 32:22-23

Here he is- 20 years after traveling, possibly this same road-about to move back into the land he had left. He is no longer the soft young man that he once was- he is a tough businessman who has learned to live in the field.

And now he tries to prepare his own heart.

So Jacob was left alone . . . Genesis 32:24

#1. Some Things Need To Be Done Alone

The Bible is so clear that we are to be a community of people who talk to each other, advise each other, correct each other and work together in our decision making. I think that some of the greatest errors are made because we don't ask for and then don't accept honest advice from those who surround us. We charge ahead on courses of disaster and those around us are left saying "I told you so!"

But that isn't the whole story. We also need to soberly own our decision-making and having carefully listened to sober advice we need to step back and be very clear that no matter what advice we get, no matter how great the consensus is- the decisions we make are ours. This is one of the tough realities that those in leadership wrestle with. There is a place where 'the buck stops' and that place is owning what we decided and then living with the consequences.

And so Jacob did what Jesus did, what Peter did, what David did, what Moses did, and what countless men and women have had to do when faced with complicated or painful crossroad- and that is spend some time alone- owning what happens next.

I believe that all of us need to find ways to do this.

After Jacob has done everything he knows how to do to look after his business prudently- the angels come back into the narrative- . . . **and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." Genesis 32:24-26**

This is definitely one of the very interesting stories in the Bible and it is interesting as much because of what is unsaid as what is said.

What do we know? From the context it is clear that there is a message for Jacob that he is not taking well. There is something about the message that makes him wrestle.

What it is- we don't know and frankly in some ways it doesn't matter. In the context this sermon- that vacant piece of not knowing the angel's specific message to Jacob could be something like this- "Jacob, you are very anxious but you are to release that anxiety to Me. You have done everything you can- now you have to just let it go and go on with your journey. Get some sleep."

Being in the place that Jacob is- that narrative makes sense to me- but in some way it doesn't matter too much. There are 1000s of other messages that could have caused Jacob to wrestle with the angel. There could have been a far more specific direction that the angel gave Jacob. God has the right to do that. Sometime He directs His people to go here or go there, or to speak to this person, or to do something specific.

The bottom line of this story, however, is that the message is problematic for some reason [that doesn't matter] and Jacob is not able to let it go. He doesn't reject it but he also doesn't take it the way it comes.

And we human have those kinds of arguments with God and people. In fact, I suspect that Jacob was particularly good at them. When he had an idea fixed in his mind- Jacob was like a dog with a bone. He would not let go.

Not everyone is like Jacob in that visible determination but in my experience many who don't have that outward doggedness still know what it is like to hang onto an idea. Some people find it easier to give outward ascent but I have learned not to confuse simple ascent with agreement.

And so when Jacob wrestles with the angel- when no one else is around- he is doing something that "everyman" does. This is a story that we have all experienced.

Finally the angel closes off the fight- "it's daybreak, Jacob. Time's up!"

No matter who we are- time runs out on arguments. Time had run out in Jacob's argument. It was now morning and the night had gone. Action was about to begin.

But the principle of "everyman" in this story is-

#2. We All Wrestle With God

Jacob knows he is wrestling with God- in fact he knew it from the beginning but like us- when we are doing so- we rarely see it in those terms- and for good reason. Why would anyone argue with God, the Creator of the Universe? It is an absurd concept and by its very nature questions God as God.

And yet we do it. In my experience we do it by making the argument take all kinds of other forms.

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-it's not a very good idea

-there are other ways to get the job done

But even though the sun was rising and the argument was over- Jacob was not willing to let the matter go- even though it was done.

**But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
Genesis 32:26**

There are 2 sides to this story- there is the story of Jacob and how he reflects "everyman." We will have more to say about that.

But there is also the story of God's response to "everyman."

The argument is over. Jacob cannot stop the rising of the sun. Esau is on his way and Jacob will meet him and yet Jacob won't stop struggling. And what does God's angel do?

The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Genesis 32:27

God's response to continuing a conversation is to move it to an even more personal level. "OK, Jacob, tell me who you are?"

When we are willing to spend time honestly sorting things out- it has to get to the place where we honestly face who we are. And what was Jacob's name? It did not have a good meaning and Jacob lived up to its negative connotation. In fact in his battle with Esau the matter of the name was front and centre. Jacob had made a deal with Esau that should never have been made. Esau then became angry and said this-

Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing! Genesis 27:36-37

And now the angel asks Jacob his name. Jacob has to admit his is tricky, deceitful "Jacob."

But what does God do in response to this, to a person who won't give up even when the battle is over, who admits to his name but probably only without thinking about it as fully as you might hope.

But God's response defines God's relationship to His people-
Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Genesis 32:28

I must say, I don't understand the 2nd half of the angel's answer. I have looked at all kinds of translations. To my way of thinking- no one overcomes God and the translation is not simple in any case.

But that doesn't matter- it says what it says. The first half of God's response, however is beautiful and simple-

#3. God Renames His People

When we engage God we have to go through a journey that ends with facing who we really are- coming to terms with our real names. For every human being there is an aspect of that real name

that reflects our sinful choices. We don't all have the same challenges but no human being escapes the fact that something inside of us chooses a course of destruction rather than healing on a consistent basis.

But God made us in His image and along side of these choices, God also placed in us the ability to choose His way.

And for those who ascent to God- He preemptively gives them a new beginning. That is often marked off by a new name.

This is illustrate in the last book of the Bible-

To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.

I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. Revelation 2:17

Renaming is done in many cultures and settings for all kinds of different reasons. In the Biblical story of Jacob, however, it is a symbol of God's grace to His people.

In the NT Peter and Paul were visibly renamed at important places in their walk with God.

At its deepest level, however, Jacob's encounter and name change represents something very profound- it represents God's offer to create a new heart within His people. It is part of the story of the entire Bible-

Create in me a pure heart, O God . . . Psalm 51:10

Jesus fulfilled the same message and explained it . . .

You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." John 3:7

This is what it takes to fix the problem of our humanity and the Good News is that this is what God wants to do within us- if we give Him permission to do so.

Of course Biblical stories, like life don't have fairy tale endings but do truly reflect life. So too this story doesn't simply end with Jacob's new name.

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Genesis 32:29-30

This is an interesting dialogue and Jacob does acknowledge that he has indeed met God's messenger. And then Jacob carries on with the journey that the rising sun demanded of him.

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. Genesis 32:31-32

And Jacob carries on his journey with a limp. Again there is a hazard into reading more into a story than it contains but it seems to me that when we are renamed by God and we accept that name as the mark of our new identity- we are not doomed to go through life with a limp as a result of that meeting.

To me that limp is the consequence of Jacob taking on a fight that was both wrong headed and persistent. And I believe that this sort of limping is something that people accept far too quickly.

Some years back there was a man who was in our church who told me his story of rebellion against God. "Now I am damaged goods," he told me. "There are things I can't do in the church because of this."

There is some truth to this. There are trusts that are broken that don't rebuild instantly- but what he was being asked to do was not among these. He instead was simply content to use his past failures as an excuse for living by the calling that was before him.

That is a far more common sentiment that you might think but the Israelite response, reflects that, it seems to me. Why not have a visible symbol of our sinfulness, that we carry around with us? There are times when Amazing Grace, is performed that I am reminded of this. ". . . that saved a wretch like me . . ." is sung heartily by people who seem to glory in their wretchedness and in the hope that in spite of this grace will be granted to them.

That is course is virtually the opposite of the meaning of that wonderful song.

Jacob, is "everyman" as he goes through life. We recognize ourselves in him and we also recognize God's amazing character in response to this humanity.

But there is another side to this story. When we encounter the "everyman" we also have the opportunity to do things differently because of what we have seen and in this case, I think the lesson I want us to go from this place with is-

#4. Live By Your New Name- Don't Live In The "Limp"

