



Sunday, October 16, 2016

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Counting Our Blessings

Genesis 32:22-31 New International Version (NIV)

Jacob Wrestles With God

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants 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. So Jacob was left alone, 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."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

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."

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

The book of Genesis is the most epic piece of literature you'll ever read. It even starts out with a bang; the big bang of creation itself is poetically dramatized as God speaks order into chaos, "And it is good". Then, there's the Adam and Eve; a love story that goes sideways through deception and shame, followed by the story of their son Cain who in a jealous rage beats his brother Able to death. Genesis also tells about Noah's ambitious Ark that withstood a flood so massive that it will never be topped. Then comes the first rainbow! Father Abraham comes along with his wife Sarah and mistress Hagar. That mess that leads to the first circumcision! Then there's Sodom and Gomorrah, avenging angels, human beings turned into pillars of salt. The saga of disappointment, struggle and heartache continue until finally, Abraham and Sarah give birth to a "legitimate" son, Isaac, who Abraham then tries to butcher in some weird human sacrifice ritual. Isaac somehow gets past that horror without therapeutic intervention, and he grows up to father the twins Esau and Jacob. Jacob turns out to be a conniving, manipulating, devious scoundrel whose only interest is winning by any means necessary. He's the *first* J.R. Ewing. You just love to hate him!

In all of this dramatic, larger than life, family drama and dysfunction, there is no more bizarre or mysterious story than Jacob's dark encounter with a shadowy figure in the dead of night. Who was this person in the middle of nowhere and why attack Jacob? What were they fighting about? Did his betrayed brother come out to exact revenge? Maybe Jacob is wrestling some kind of super powered angel, or maybe he was actually struggling with a physical aberration of God, like that black smoke in *LOST* or *Game of Thrones*. Perhaps we should we read this story as a vivid metaphor. Jacob is actually in a very dark emotional place wrestling with his own guilty conscious.

And what's all this naming and renaming about? No one can answer these questions with certainty, but we can know from the rest of the Jacob's colorful life is that this mysterious midnight match is to become the defining moment of his life. Following this violent incident he goes on to become a totally changed man, transforming into a true patriarch and spiritual giant, so there must be a thing or two we can glean out of it.

Let's first ask God's blessing before we get slammed in the hip.

Mysterious God, your Word is a bottomless treasure of enigmatic wisdom, hidden in the wonder and magic of timeless stories. Open up our minds, soften our hearts and quicken our spirit, so that we might

wrestle out the deeper meaning that points to a new path, leading us toward transformation and reunion. Amen

Maybe you've heard the old story about the fly fisherman who died and thought he'd gone to Heaven. He finds himself under a blue sky on a gorgeous river with all his gear. Casting into the current, he quickly catches a perfect 2 pound trout, then another, and another. On an on it goes. Each cast rolls off perfectly. His fly lands gently in the crystal current for an instant before yet another beautiful fish hits the hook. He can't fathom his good fortune. The fish are biting like he's never experienced before. Everything is absolutely perfect. But in less than an hour he begins to realize that he is not in Heaven at all. Instead, as the predictability turns to boredom and pointlessness, he realizes this is actually in *Hell*.

We may hate opposition and struggle, but it is critical for our mental, physical and spiritual growth. Without hardship, we would all just languish in the boredom of tedious complacency. I don't know what it is about being human, but it seems true enough, that growth and transformation only happen through the gristmill of pain, loss and struggle.

I watch my 11-month grandson, Blake, thrashing about in pain and discomfort as he sprouts perfectly formed, sparkingly white teeth. And, who here doesn't remember well the emotional torment of trying to fit in to middle school? Then, as we grow into early adulthood, we have to wrestle out what our place in the world is. We fight hard to attain "the good life". (Whatever that is.)

Perhaps the idea of success, security and happiness is actually a sparkling, bedazzled tin lure that baits us into engaging and enduring life's struggles. When you think about it, it's actually the trials and difficulties that truly form our identity. Our battles shape our psychology more than any victory. It's adversity that impacts future choices far more than success. It seems that in the natural order of life, hardship and struggle signal the inevitable outcome of genuine growth.

I remember when I was 10 years old, attending the Mable I. Wilson elementary school in Cumberland Maine. Our 5th grade teacher was a young, early adopter of the flowerchild movement of the mid-sixties. She loved connecting our learning to the world around us. Our big spring project that year was to capture a monarch caterpillar and place it in a screen cage large enough to hold a tree branch. We were to report on stages of transformation from a crawling caterpillar to soaring butterfly. My friend Mark was a very competitive kind of kid who always needed to win. Even when there was no inherent competition, he would find a way to claim first place. One day after school we were at his house checking out his monarch cocoon. It had just begun to break apart. You could see the little orange wings struggling to break through the silky wrapping. Mark reached inside the cheesecloth pen and broke apart what was left of the cocoon so he could say he was first to hatch a butterfly! On the last day of school we were to bring our project

in and release the creatures back into the wild all at once. That's when I learned that Mark's butterfly never fully developed strong wings. They were misshapen, small and weak. Apparently, it was the *struggle* to be free of the cocoon that formed the beautiful grace and strength of the butterfly's wings.

So here is where we find Jacob. His entire life has been consumed with the struggle to be first, no matter what the moral compromise or ethical breach. In Jacob's world there were winners and losers, and he was obsessed with winning. Now he suddenly finds himself alone in the dark wilderness and is attacked by this unidentified assailant. But he's got to win, right? He fights and fights with all his strength until, in the end; he is marked with a physical reminder of the encounter and then set free as a spiritually transformed being. *Through* adversary he is transformed. He is set free. Into a new day he soars with grace, humility and dignity.

Even though we are trained to mask it well, each of us face our own pain and suffering. We live with the weight of unresolved grief, broken relationships, compromised morality, declining health, entitled self-interest. And then, like Jacob, sooner or later the burden is too heavy to carry and we find ourselves alone in the dark wilderness with no pretense left to protect, no possessions to pacify our strained psyche, no social standing to bolster our sense of identity. This is when the wrestling really begins and we struggle for the very essence of our life. Only in this dark, empty place can we have the courage to genuinely wrestle with God. Here in this place we must wrestle out a blessing, because without it, we're done.

We are now facing a time of uncertainty. Around the world, in our nation and even in our own yard, impending change is standing in the wings. And yet, in the anxiety and discomfort of the unknown is exactly where God meets us like never before, and we must not run away from the encounter. We must remember our past and count our blessings. Name them one by one and commit to a future based on the experience of our past blessings. This is not a time of retreat, this is a time to redouble our efforts and boldly claim the blessing of what is ahead, even if it hurts us a bit.

People of God, the dawn of a new day is breaking. And as we struggle for new meaning and redefinition of our identity, let us not be afraid to wrestle out the amazing blessing that God is so eagerly waiting to give. AMEN