

Wrestling with God - Jacob at Jabbok **Sermon on Genesis 32: 23-31**

When I was at Theological College 25 odd years ago I had a fellow student who suffered from severe migraines. Even though pain killers were available and he did take them, he was completely out of order for a day or two, when these terrible headaches got hold of him. He was going through the most awful pains, got sick to the stomach, his arms and hands went numb; sometimes he could hardly see, and often he had a roaring in his ears.

He couldn't bear any light, and had to let the blinds down in his room on the dormitory. For 24 to 48 hours – it depended... - he had to withdraw completely from the normal life.

Once he told me whenever the migraines didn't stop after 24 hours, when he woke up in the morning after a night's restless sleep, and the pain was still there, fear came on top of the pain: the fear that this nightmare would never end...

His grandfather had suffered from incurable neuralgia in his face and forehead, and he always feared that this would be his destiny, too.

This student also told me that when after 1 or 2 nights the pain was gone, when he woke up in the mornings, he always felt like Jacob after his night's struggle at the river Jabbok. He pulled up the blinds, showered and dressed and faced a pain free day with all its newness. The first few hours after this day-long wrestling with the pain would feel insecure, wobbly and unsure... His soul and body were still shaken by the painful passage he had just passed through, but the more he let himself into the new day, the more he felt like walking through the dawn towards the bright sunshine of life as it has always been...

That was, I think, my first encounter with Jacob's story, and with the fact that it really meant a lot to somebody's personal life and story.

Genesis 32:24

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

...the rest you know, which leads to the last verse...

Genesis 32:31a.

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

A second time when the story touched me most deeply was when my father died. I remember most vividly how he struggled on his death bed for a couple of days and a very difficult last night. And just before the first light broke through the darkness he passed away. While his body cooled down, and I closed his eyes and folded his hands, the sun rose above the small hill of my home town.

My father had made it through his life... often wrestling and struggling, and I believed that where he was then, he would walk right into the sunrise, and that he would not even limp...

I also had made it – through an unforgettable night; the sun rose while it dawned on me that this experience had shaped and changed me forever.

Besides my husband and my two sons, he had been the most important person of my 37 years of life. I felt this incredible loss. I limped a bit, and I mourned a lot.

Once you have made it through such or a similar experience, you cannot remain the same.

Jacob was from then on limping because of his hip.
And we – we may be changed, shaped, marked, formed in many different ways.
It is always a similar pattern: we leave the dark, greet the dawn, and embrace a new day...

Let us now take a closer look at the text:
It is a passage of the Old Testament that fascinates and puzzles at the same time. The whole story seems somehow as much out of joint as Jacob's hip is after the fight.
It is not a straightforward story that leads to a simple conclusion. It leaves room for many ideas & assumptions..., and maybe I can only work with it by re-reading & re-telling it in small portions and mix those with my own ideas and my very own life story.

Jacob, the main figure in the text appears greatly vulnerable and alone, in need of company and care.
I can easily identify with that.
But what comes then is a confrontation with God that I wouldn't wish my worst enemy. There is God in human form who attacks...
On his way to the country of his origin, Jacob had stayed behind at the border. He assumes that his brother is still full of hatred and looking for revenge. He is fearful and in deep distress. He is afraid that Esau would take from him his very life.
To my great surprise – and probably also to Jacob's – it is not Esau who jumps at him in the dark and wrestles him to the ground but God (that is at least how the Old Testament narrator puts it, that is his image of God. We may well have a different one nowadays...).

God and Jacob struggle for a considerable amount of time. When God sees that daybreak is near, and that he has not been able to defeat Jacob (what a surprising thing to happen between God and a human being), God strikes Jacob on the hip.
This hurts Jacob long term, and brings the struggle to a climax. Jacob must now be in horrendous pain. But in spite of the overwhelming pain he does not let go! Jacob is marked for the rest of his life. But God could not escape from him. Jacob alone had the power to grant God's request for release... God, on the other side, - God alone had the power to grant a blessing.
Jacob's insistence brings about the blessing (the theme of his life) and a new name. Jacob is forever changed by this fight, as he limps away towards the promised land.

No matter what it is that strikes me at times: God, or life itself, bad coincidence, destiny... I wish I had the power of Jacob to resist letting go and giving in to the powers that hold me in their grip. I wish I could hold fast to the possibility of a blessing in the worst moments of my life! I adore this man from the Old Testament who from now on limps, but is forever blessed☺
And God: God is once again caught up in Jacob's story.
Is it God who allowed it?
Or Jacob who made it happen?
Or a bit of both?

Who changed because of the struggle? God? Jacob? Both?

The fact that God gives Jacob a new name does not necessarily mean that Jacob's character has entirely changed. It is more so that God's plans for Jacob and his future may have changed.

Jacob's new name "Israel" – which means "God rules" - affirms him how strong Jacob now is. He is assured and can trust that if he can face and withstand to God, he may also be able to do so with his brother... the old image of "the harsh and tough times not breaking you but making you strong out of all proportion..."

Jacob is blessed.

Blessings are normally not gained through struggle, but Jacob holds God to the old promise: intercession in a very physical term, if you like.

"God, I do not let you go. I have seen you face to face. I am strong enough. I can now face anything. You are in there with me and arming me with all I need..."

I must say, I would quite like to have a bit of that. Being able to hold God so fast in my life, beyond all doubts and no matter what life is asking of me. I – and surely you would too – we all could do with a share of that, couldn't we?

The next picture the author of Jacob's story has in store for us is: a main character limping down the road towards the promised land as the sun's first rays peek over the horizon.

Marked, shaped, influenced forever...

It stands for two things: Jacob's success and God's grace.

Jacob has struggled and prevailed. He is not God's victim or puppet. No.

Jacob is an evenly powerful partner in God's world with its dark and light sides.

And God, God is gracious. God does not eliminate Jacob but strengthen and equip him for future good and bad moments.

The story does not tell us how Jacob let go of God, or how God has left him. The end or farewell is left open... allowing us to guess...

My favourite guess is that there is no letting go of on either side. But this is pure assumption; or maybe wishful thinking. Wishing that in my life I could also be so closely connected with God after having struggled through the dark. I wish that there is no separation anymore, but me in God and God in me...

"Remaining bound to God and facing the uncertain future boldly," who would not wish that for him- or herself?!

Interpreters of our story have often argued about whether this story in Genesis 32 describes a real physical or merely an inner struggle. The hip and the limping lead us to assume something physical; but today we also know that an emotional shock can cause physical hurt... So, it may be wise to just take the story as told to us... told in a very human form, but taking place and repeating itself in so many different levels of our life and being.

We will never be able to clearly answer whether Jacob really fought or whether he was dreaming. Nightmares can paralyse, too.

What we can state clearly is that whatever happened at the river of Jabbok involved not only a small part of Jacob, but his whole and entire being.

...the being of one who was already wrestling before he was born.

In earlier chapters in Genesis we are told how Rebecca, the mother of Jacob and Esau, can feel the twins battling already in her womb. She is told that “two people were in her womb, and that one day one would submit the other.”

Conflict is predicted, and it comes true.

Esau is born first, but with Jacob following him on the spot, holding jealously onto his heel.

Right from the beginning the two boys are as different from one another as one can be. Esau is his father’s favourite and loves hunting and hiking. Jacob is Rebecca’s darling and prefers to stay around her, the tents and the camp.

Jacob is clever but deceitful. He envies his brother & seeks an opportunity to cheat him.

One can of course wonder which roles Isaac and Rebecca played in all this, but this is today going to far...

We all know, how the bowl of stew misled Esau to give away his right of the first born, and together with that his father’s blessing. Isaac was old and blind. Esau was away in the fields, and Jacob got what he always wanted: his father’s blessing.

Esau longed for revenge. And Jacob had to flee.

All alone in the desert. A stone as a pillow. That is not what he’d been dreaming of, and still there that night he dreamt his life-saving dream: a strange light around him, a stairway from heaven, and God’s messengers going up and down on it.

Then God spoke to Jacob & promised him to never abandon him, but to be there with him, to give him a home and a land, and a family, to watch over him and bring him back to his country.

The next morning Jacob travelled on, met his uncle, married the uncle’s two daughters, was given children...

But his uncle made his life a misery, and Jacob couldn’t wait to get back home.

After years of ups and downs and struggles between Jacob and Laban, Jacob and his household eventually left Haran and headed to where Jacob had once come from, and then it is just a river that still separates Jacob from his home country and his brother Esau.

That is the background story to today’s sermon text.

And here we are – back with our story.

It was the darkness that spoke to me immediately in this text... the loneliness of the person, probably closely connected with fear, guilt and pain...

The struggle that Jacob had gone through impressed me, the fact that in the midst of all that he doesn’t let go of the control of his life.

Attacked by threatening forces in the night one could just give up... let go...

surrender to the overwhelming powers that stand there in the way, and die...

...a bit like Elijah in the desert when he throws himself under a broom tree & wants nothing more but to die: “O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors...”

Elijah clearly was much more a man of God than Jacob had ever been. Jacob was the trickster and the cheater. He was worse than his ancestors. He had betrayed and hurt, had to run away, flee...

Jacob is the classic lonely figure in the dark...

But there in the dark God meets him - several times.

The two stories we know best are in Genesis 28 and in Genesis 32. God as the one who promises care and guidance, and as the one who confronts, attacks and stands in the way... who threatens to overthrow all Jacob's plans and intentions.

Meeting God in the dark is a theme we often find in biblical stories. And I don't only mean the night, as we heard it in the story of Nicodemus meeting Jesus. I also mean the harsh and painful darkneses we all have to go through at times. However awful they can be, and however long they last, if they don't kill and destroy us, they seem to make us especially open & receptive to the spiritual, the divine, that which is above and beyond the painful reality we have to go through.

In this reality being blessed and limping lie very close together.

When Jacob's night at the river Jabbok begun, he had already gone through a lot; and the worst and most dangerous was lying ahead: meeting his brother.

The wrestling must have taken most of his leftover energy. When God struck him on the hip the pain must have been excruciating. But still Jacob did not let go! He insists that a blessing **MUST** be the outcome of so much struggle, so much risk, and so much pain! He gets it – and limps for the rest of his life.

Many of us believe that real blessing only lies in a bright and beautiful life full of joys, successes and celebrations. A good school report, passed exams, an always happy marriage, plenty of money in the bank, healthy and promising children & an awesome career...

Only if life offers all that, then God is on our side?

That is a big mistake.

Jacob's story at Peniel teaches us something else.

It shows us a God on the side of those whose lives are struck and marked forever – not by God (I don't believe that!), but by life itself, by destiny, or bad coincidence...

(I rather use the words life or destiny and not God, because in my image of God disaster and pain do not come from him. God is with me in the pain, yes, but he is not causing it!).

Remembering Jesus on the cross we can clearly say that God is at the side of those facing horror. God is suffering and crying out with those who wrestle against life's harshness. God is in those who struggle in the dark. And in the end it is their perseverance which is bringing about the blessing and the new beginning. Even though life will never be the same again: it will be handicapped and limited on the one side, and full of new chances and challenges on the other side.

It is up to the individual, how we make the best of it.

The promised land, Jacob entered had to greet a person with a physical disability, and so had Esau.

And maybe, maybe this is the secret of their reconciliation: admitting to one's frailty, and still respecting and rejoicing over who we are, and that we are alive. Nothing more and nothing less.

Maybe all God asks of Jacob and Esau, and of us, is:
To embrace life with all its imperfections and shortcomings, with its sickness and weakness, its losses and fears, the accidents and catastrophes; and to never expect that wrestling in the dark leaves us unwounded, but accept and understand that it brings us closer to our real selves and closer to the God who loves us just as we are. Amen.

Statement of Interdependence

I do not stand alone
but with others to support me
I will stand my ground

I do not see the way
but with others to walk with me
I can make my path

I do not possess the truth
but with others to witness to what they know
I will be able to discern what is right

I cannot master all skills
but with others who will lend their accomplishments
I can do enough

I cannot carry every burden
but with others to share it
I may bear my own load

I cannot meet all needs
but with others to nourish and replenish me
I will be able to give enough

I do not have limitless choice
but with others to consult
I will make my own choices gladly

I will not always be consistent
but with others to laugh with me
I will regain my equanimity

I am not invincible
but with others to reach out a hand
I may learn from my mistakes and start again

I cannot be perfect
but with others to make up the shortfall of my imperfections
I can content to be good enough.
Amen.