

“LIMPING INTO THE FUTURE”
GENESIS 32: 22-32

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Those of us who love baseball—which describes all Chicagoans, I suppose, because how else could we put up with the Cubs all these years?—debate endlessly about who was the greatest player of all times. Babe Ruth? Bob Feller? My personal pick: Lou Gehrig. Or how about Joe DiMaggio, the man who holds the record for the most consecutive hits. Shortly after DiMag’s death, Tom Boswell wrote a piece about him in *The Washington Post*. He told a story Mr. DiMaggio told about himself many times. Seems that he and a friend were leaving Cooperstown after a visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame and they decided to take some back roads through upper New York state.

They were deep in conversation and they got lost. Finally, they stopped a farmer on a tractor to ask directions. The farmer, apparently unaware of DiMaggio’s identity, leaned on the passenger door and, speaking across DiMaggio to the driver, began saying, “You go down about three miles—“ Then, casually, in mid-sentence, he patted the great centerfielder on the arm and said, “I see you, Joe,” then finished his directions and went back to his tractor.

When DiMaggio told the story, he didn’t have to explain it, because like all really good stories, it made its own point. “You knew,” wrote Mr. Boswell, “he was talking about people—like both the farmer and himself—who understood the virtue of quiet dignity. Knowing who you are. Valuing yourself. Giving other people space and respect. Having a sense of values that goes beyond celebrity.”

DiMaggio knew that, if he hadn’t possessed certain talents, might have been the farmer. And the farmer, if he could have hit a curveball, might have been DiMaggio. They had special gifts, each of them. But what mattered was who they were.

I have been a pastor most of my adult life, and that, dear friends, constitutes a lot of years, decades, a millennium. On any given Sunday when a preacher looks out at the congregation, he or she senses the sadness of so many people. There is the person who is chained to a seemingly meaningless job but who cannot quit and look for another employment. A sense of failure, of worthlessness pervades that pew. There is the woman with gaping wounds of grief, facing life without a spouse, scared to death of how she will cope. And the socially marginalized, perplexed and angry because obstacles are constantly being put in their way.

These people are asking the question we all ask at one time or another, “Does God care? Can God do anything about my situation?” The narrative of Jacob’s wrestling with the “man” or the “angel” (or perhaps even God) at the Jabbok is one of the Bible’s

archetypal stories of struggle. At one level it's a story of the human struggle with god, but at another level it is a story of a human being's struggle with himself.

Jacob is one of those biblical characters who never quite figures out who he is and how to use the gifts God has given. He's a perpetual unfinished product, both sincere and conniving, cynical and naïve, hopeful and yet destructive. His story is at the heart of the layers of tradition handed down orally for centuries, until probably around the Great Exile in 538-536 B.C.E. the Israelites began to write down these legends, myths and defining exploits.

This is one of the oldest stories in the Bible, one handed down through oral tradition in various forms. Brief as it is, the story of Jacob at the Jabbok is strange and complicated. Just identifying his opponent is a problem. Initially we are told that "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day"(verse 24), but later it appears that the opponent has the power both to put Jacob's thigh out of joint and to bless him.

Like all of us, Jacob comes to this illuminating experience bearing his memories and regrets, his hopes and dreams. In one sense, he leaves his regrets on the other side of the river Jabbok. He leaves his two wives, Leah and Rachel, his two concubines, his eleven children and all the prosperity he has amassed in fourteen years of working for his father-in-law on one side of the river while he in fear camps on the other side for the night. But in another sense, he carries the demons with him: he has cheated his brother Esau toward whom he is moving with hope for reconciliation, he has cheated Laban and he carries the rancor of being cheated by his wily father-in-law.

When you couple this with the fact that the opponent fears the daylight and refuses to divulge his name, the ancient notion of a nocturnal demon possesses the story. The two resolutions to the story are integral to the plot and to each other. Jacob's name is changed to Israel, or, more likely, he is given an additional name. This emerges directly from the wrestling match. On the one hand, Jacob demands to know his opponent's name but he refuses to disclose it. In the oral tradition, to know the name of the nocturnal demon or deity was to obtain a measure of control over him.

The name Israel means "one who strives with God." That's obviously a good name for Jacob however you understand his life. But the blessing, the direct result of the conflict, is given, not earned. The opponent demands to be released because daybreak is approaching, but Jacob refuses to release him until he is blessed (verse 26). This is the hinge upon which the drama turns. Who will win the contest? Jacob receives the blessing, but he does not escape without injury.

You and I know both sides of Jacob, don't we? We wrestle in the dark with the demons we wish we could name. We are those who struggle with God. We are those who are wounded, limping from all our struggles and worries, past regrets and present dreams.

I love Anne LaMott's writing. I think *Traveling Mercies* may be one of the best books yet published about what it means to be a Christian in the twenty-first century. She's a

remarkable woman who has experienced a lot in her life—promiscuous sex, abortions, drugs, alcohol, recovery, acceptance by an African-American congregation, the sermons of a very unusual woman pastor and life-changing experiences.

My friend Debra Bendis interviewed Ms. LaMott for the *Christian Century* magazine and reminded her that, “You mention in the book that Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* made a big impression on you...and confirmed your faith in God. It’s an odd book, in a way, to have that sort of effect, since it’s about Abraham trusting God even though that meant being willing to sacrifice his son. Why do you think the book encouraged your faith?”

(Now the secret’s out. You know why I love Anne LaMott so much. *Fear and Trembling* contains the greatest sermon never preached—Kierkegaard’s reflections on Abraham and Isaac.)

Ms. LaMott replied, “I just understood what Abraham felt about the world—about how little it had to offer that could make any kind of long-term difference. I was a person who had a lot of success early in life—socially and as a student and tennis player, so I knew how thin it wore, and that you needed more. Reading about how really hopeless Abraham understood the world to be without God’s promise of companionship, meaning, direction and redemption—it just rang a bell. It’s like that line: the soul rejoices in hearing what it already knows...Abraham knew that he was never going to understand this nonunderstandable mystery of our lives, so in the face of that he made a decision to jump, to start swimming in that cold water of God’s will.”

What kind of God puts before us the choice with which Abraham was confronted: to kill his son, his only son Isaac, the heir to all of God’s promises?

And now, what kind of awesome, terrible, awe-ful God assaults us when we, like Jacob, are most vulnerable. This is not the God we learned about in Sunday School, the God we want to claim in divine gentleness and sweetness and smooth grace. This is a God whose grace assaults us when we are in the darkness, who will not let go of us, who wrestles with us in the dark reaches of terror and memory.

For most of us, the choices are not so stark and clear. We don’t come to dramatic forks in the road. We make choices that are more convenient, subtle, ambiguous. And we cannot know the results. Then, one day we look back and we see how we got to this place—often not a bad place, indeed sometimes a comfortable spot—in our career, our relationships, our family life.

Here is Jacob after his all-night wrestling match, finally being given enough courage to start swimming in that same cold water. Those who know struggle—and who does not?—find in this story the story of our lives. Life entails strife, conflict, desire, wrestling with our consciences, demons and God. Often we neither see the face nor know the name of what confronts us in the night.

But the story tells us: do not let go, continue the struggle, even when God is experienced as threatening. Moreover, it tells us that struggle—even with God—may end with a blessing, even though we may limp from that moment on.

Brother John was a monk in a Benedictine monastery; his job, his calling was washing dishes, cleaning up after the community meals. That's where his abilities met the needs of the world and thus he felt called. But one day a new abbot came to the monastery and the abbot decreed that every member of the faith community would take his turn at preaching. Brother John had never preached, didn't want to, didn't know how. But the abbot insisted. "Next Sunday is your turn. Preach."

So John mounted the pulpit. His heart was about to leap out of his throat, his palms were dripping sweat, his voice was hoarse, his armpits felt like peanut butter. He croaked, "Does anybody know what I'm going to say?" With one voice, the other monks replied, "No!" John said, "God will reveal it. Go in peace."

The abbot was not pleased. "Brother John," he said, "you're going to have to do better than that. Next Sunday you will preach again." Same thing: thumping heart, dry mouth, sweat rolling off him, John went into the pulpit. "Does anybody know what I'm going to say?" This time they responded, "Yes!" "Well, then," said Brother John, "there's no need for me to tell you. Go in peace."

Once more the abbot was not pleased. The third try put John before the sea of faces and he suffered the identical feelings as before. Same question: "Does anybody here know what I'm going to say?" Half the congregation responded, "Yes!" The other half said, "No!" Suddenly Brother John's anxiety dissipated. With an air of authority he had never before exhibited, he said, "Then let those who know tell those who don't know."

The abbot was ecstatic. "That was one of the best sermons I have ever heard," he said.

Some of us come to worship knowing. Others come not knowing. Some are sure in our faith, others are searching. Some know a God of gentleness and kindness, others are assaulted in the darkness by God.

Like Jacob, God calls us, changes our name, struggles with us, and sends us limping into the future.

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