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“Wrestling at the River”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
September 6, 2017
Genesis 32:22-31

The haunting stories told in *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant stir the hearts of many. Within the pages of this novel, a drama unfolds that is at the same time familiar and yet completely unfamiliar. It is familiar in that it is based on the biblical story of the family of Jacob, primarily as seen through the eyes of his daughter, Dinah. Yet the book is also *unfamiliar* in that it is a fictional account of the “story beyond the story.” In it, the reader finds the familiar Jacob narrative - the stories of Jacob tricking his brother Esau out of his birthright and tricking his father in order to receive his blessing. Also retold are the stories of Leah and Rachel and how Jacob works seven years so that he can marry each woman. And today’s story can be found in these pages as well, only this time, Jacob’s small, insignificant daughter Dinah tells the story from her own perspective.

In the book, Dinah recalls the night before Jacob's wrestling match, when all the family and herds had crossed the river Jabbok – all of the family, that is, except Jacob. He remained on the far bank. Dinah remembers her father's words to her brother Reuben:

“See to the animals. . . . Don't bother with a tent. The night is warm enough. I will cross with the first light. Be ready to leave.”

. . . The moon was still new, so the night was dark. The water would have sweetened the air had not the wet coats of the animals muddied its perfume with musk. They bleated in their sleep, unused to being wet in the chill of the night. I tried to stay awake to listen to the music of the rushing water, but this time the splashing lulled me into a deep sleep. Everyone slept heavily. If my father cried out, no one heard him.¹

The next morning, when Jacob did not appear as he had said he would,

. . . Reuben, Simon, and Judah plunged into the water to seek their father. They found him beaten and naked in the middle of a brushy clearing where the grass and bushes had been crushed and broken in a wide circle around him. Reuben ran back to us shouting for a robe to cover our father, and then carried him back across the stream . . . his left leg hanging at an awkward

¹Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador, USA, 1997), pp.120-121.

angle as though it were no longer attached to his body. . . . Reuben had no answers to [anyone's] questions, and [all] fell silent.²

Today's passage from Genesis is no less mysterious than Dinah's telling. What we *do* learn from the text is this: Jacob wrestles all night with a "man" as the Hebrew text reads, though some translations call the wrestler an "angel," and one Old Testament scholar claims it was a "river demon."³ Jacob himself claims that it was "God." We know that for a long time neither wrestler seems to be able to overcome the other. What is not clear is *why* this angel/man/river demon is wrestling Jacob. Nor do we know the details of what really happened that long hot night of strife.

Barbara Brown Taylor interprets the events of that night when the unknown angel/man shows up and starts to wrestle with Jacob:

Whoever he is, he is strong. [Jacob] is a big man himself, but in this ["man"], this angel, this well-muscled God, he has found his rival. There is no talking at first, just the dull slap of flesh against flesh, as one of them gains a hold and the other one breaks it, both of them sucking air between the low grunts that seem to come from somewhere deep in the earth beneath them. That is how dark it is. They might as well be wrestling in some

² *ibid.*

³ W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 230.

underground chamber for all they can see of each other, an arm snaking around the neck with no warning, the knee planted behind the blind back. Then fear gives the stranger new strength. He drops his weight and Jacob's hip cracks...⁴

Who is the victor now? It seems clear, but it is not. Jacob, through his pain, holds on to this unknown being for dear life. He knows that something is different about him, so he holds on. He will not allow his night of wrestling to be in vain.

The being in Jacob's grasp seems to fear the light of day. "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob replies (echoing another story in his past), "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

What? Why in the world would anyone think that a night of hard-fought, muscle-wrenching wrestling would lead first to a hip injury and then to a blessing? Why would someone who had injured you want to bless you? But Jacob realizes that he is not wrestling with just anyone. He is wrestling with God - Yahweh. Elohim. The Holy One. God in the flesh. So the rest of us can think whatever we want and call this being "man," "angel," "river demon." We can even surmise that Jacob was wrestling metaphorically with his own fear, guilt, and anxiety about meeting face to face the next day with Esau, the brother he hadn't seen in twenty

⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 112.

years who had plenty of good reasons to be upset with him. Think what you want. To Jacob it is very clear. “I will call this place Peniel, the face of God, for I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.”

In the end, Jacob limps away with a badly injured hip, a new name, and a blessing from God. All in all, that’s not a bad night’s work. His new name is Israel, which means “the one who strives with God,” and Jacob knows that it is nothing short of a miracle that he has looked upon the face of God and been allowed to survive.

“Why Jacob?” we might ask. He isn’t exactly the most upright of characters. He has just escaped from his kinsman Laban under circumstances that were a bit shady and he goes to meet his brother whom he robbed of his birthright many years ago. Jacob is a trickster, a liar and a cheat. But he is also chosen by God, from before his birth, to be a part of a long line of God’s people. He’s been a rebel for all his thirty-something years, but this riverside encounter forces him (physically, spiritually, and literally) to come face to face with God, to confront his own dark side, and to change the way he will live as a chosen child of God. No more trickery, no more deceit, no more lying and cheating. It took a wrestling match to make him understand, but in that long dark night of striving, he had seen himself face to face and he had seen God face to face and he would never be the same again.

Have you ever had a night such as this one? When the shadows of evening grow and grow until you are in complete darkness and alone and, though most nights you can fall asleep rather quickly, this night you are tormented. This night you call upon God in anger or confusion or fear. This night you yell at God, accuse God, question God, and despise God. This night perhaps you are tormented by your own choices of the past and how they have come to affect you and your family. Or you are tormented by the choices of someone else. Or perhaps you are tormented by the knowledge that you have lost control – in situations of disease or death or injury. On this night you fight with God, wrestling this way and that, still blaming, still angry, still hurting. The darkness makes it scarier and lonelier and you get tired from all the fighting and from all the emotion, until finally you collapse exhausted and beaten. Instead of turning away from God, though, you find yourself clinging even more tightly, even more tightly. And maybe then is when you ask to be changed. Because you can't save yourself anymore – you've tried it and it didn't work. We can't make it apart from God. So in this dark night of the soul, we asked to be changed – to be renamed by grace – to be broken and then healed by love – to be broken and then healed by love.

Television journalist Bill Moyers knows exactly what this transformative wrestling match with God feels like. Years ago he had a heart attack and almost

died. Shortly after that experience, when he was working on a Genesis series for TV, he and a colleague came to today's passage and he told her:

I know that struggle, because in my dark night I found myself wrestling and wondering, "Is God's purpose for me good? Can I trust God? Can I count on God for whatever the future holds?" And I found myself crying out, and in the days that followed I knew that deep inside of my being in that encounter with God in the darkness and in the aloneness, something had changed in me. And I had found new strength and new hope and new comfort, but something else had changed. In my woundedness I realized that all my life I'd been wounding other people. I'd been competitive, I'd wanted to succeed, and so in doing that, in seeking that success I'd wounded my wife, my colleagues, my children. In my own night of struggle and wounding I discovered that I did not want to wound anymore, that I wanted not to be a wounder, but a wounded healer.⁵

As Jacob limped out to see his brother Esau, he did so with a new name "Israel." He did so as a man who had chosen to depend upon God, rather than upon himself. He came to Esau without pride and without trickery and without deceit. Knowing he had wronged his brother, he came humbly, seeking forgiveness,

⁵ This story was told by Presbyterian pastor and college president Roberta Hestenes in her sermon "Wrestling with God." www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hestenes_3910.htm

bowing seven times to the ground as he approached his brother. And Esau? He ran to Jacob, embraced him, fell upon his neck and kissed him, and together they wept.

Thanks be to God for those long, dark, life-changing nights. May we all be so wounded... and so transformed.

Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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