

“A LIMP AND A BLESSING”
Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21
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Let me tell you the story of a man named Jacob. He was born the second of twins, moments behind his older brother, and given the name Jacob, translated as heel-catcher, supposedly because he was born so close after his brother. But “heel-catcher” in Hebrew is an old idiom. To be a heel catcher is to take advantage of the one before you; to be a liar, a deceiver. And Jacob lived up to his name. He manipulated his brother Esau into giving Jacob his birthright. With the help of his mother, Jacob deceived his father into giving him the blessing of the first born. He acquired all these things, but then he had to flee his family and all their wealth and possessions because Esau, enraged, was after him, and the young Jacob was a weak and weasely man. He would rather run than fight.

He ran to Haran, to his family’s kinsman, Laban, where he fell in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel. Laban told Jacob that if he worked for him seven years he could marry his beloved, which Jacob gladly did—only to find out on his wedding night that he had taken Rachel’s older sister Leah in marriage instead. The deceiver had become the deceived. So he worked another seven years for his desired bride and soon after they were wed worked more years after that. Then Jacob had a longing to go home. He wanted to live again among the familiar; he wanted to see his father and mother, his sisters, his brother even. And so, now all grown up, now a wealthy man in his own right, he, with his wives and children, his flocks and his herds, he set out to go back to the place that was home. He started the journey optimistic, with some small trepidation. But as he drew closer, a messenger came to tell him that his brother Esau was approaching Jacob’s encampment with a company of some 400 men. Not good news. Optimism turned to dread, and a kind of stoic fatalism. This was it: Jacob’s moment of reckoning.

He sought to protect those he cared for, sent his family and his servants and all their possessions across to the other side of the Jabok River. And as he watched night descend, he stood alone, poised between his past and his future. On the one side stood all he had been and done and could take responsibility for, and all that life had handed him because that’s what life does. On the other side, the future beckoned, the full range of its possibilities. And Jacob was alone in the dark of night.

Scripture tells us that in this pivotal moment of Jacob’s life, a man came out of nowhere and wrestled with Jacob. All night long, they wrestled, and in struggle, Jacob’s hip was put out of joint. As the new day broke, Jacob’s sparring partner tried to pull away, but Jacob would not let go the stranger until Jacob had received a blessing. And the stranger said, “You shall not longer be Jacob the deceiver, but you will now be named Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” And Jacob saw that it was God with whom he had wrestled all night long, and he named the place Peni-el, which means “face of God,” for he had wrestled with God and come through it with a limp and a blessing.

The stories of the book of Genesis are among the oldest stories of our faith and they speak in amazingly sophisticated ways to who we are as humans and how and where our lives intersect with the divine. I love Genesis; it’s my favorite book of the Bible. But of all its wonderful stories, none touch me like stories of the Jacob cycle. Jacob is so fully human. He grows from an unpromising youth into more measured

maturity; and we know him, as he enters his long night of struggle, capable of both love and deceit, of honor and manipulation. We have seen him weak and strong, canny and wise. And now, as he turns towards home, it is for him the moment of deciding, the moment where he must make sense of his life, and choose where to go with it.

The story of Jacob's midnight wrestling rings true for me. In that moment, he struggles with all that he has been and all that life has been, and it is painful for him. And the pain of what has been lost, missed, or broken will never quite go away. We are told that Jacob will limp forever because of his ordeal. And about that, he is given no choice. Life can be hard. Facing ourselves is sometimes even harder, and it marks us. Jacob's limp is the outward and visible sign of the seriousness of his inward struggle. And I think of that limp often when I talk with people who have lived through the ordinary crises of life—pain, loss, bad decisions, bad breaks. Such experiences change us, and living through them means that we will never be the same. Never. That's the truth. It doesn't mean we can't go on, that we can't make something new and good, or even better, of our lives; but the hurt of life makes us different. If all of us here wore the pain and suffering we have lived through exteriorly, I would guess that most of us would limp like Jacob. The limp, the mark, the change, if you live even through only the "ordinary" crises of life, they are unavoidable, out of our control.

What we can control when we try to reconcile past and future, is, in the language of this story, whether we struggle long enough, whether we refuse to let go, to be done, until we receive a blessing. Jacob would not let loose his assailant until, beyond the point of pain, he could be made new, made better, given a new name and a new purpose. There are so many platitudes we humans coin—that suffering makes us stronger, that God never gives us anything we can't handle. You've heard them all just like I have. But none of those sayings are *de facto* true. We can't avoid pain. We can't avoid the limp that life can cause. But we choose, it is an act of our will, to keep struggling with what has been until out of it we find the place where fear and devastation give way to love, and out of the flames of old anger is forged the possibility of new and better life. It doesn't just happen. We have to want it and push towards it, refuse to let go until we find the blessing that can grow even out of our worse nightmares.

This morning, along with our partner church in Takarazuka, we will be remembering in prayer the victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945 at 8:15 in the morning. When I was in Japan, perhaps the most profound experience of the trip was meeting a woman named Yamaoko, a hibaksha, a survivor of the bomb. She had been a middle schooler on her way to school when the bomb was dropped; all her family killed; and she herself left terribly deformed, her fingers fused together and her head fused to her shoulder. This woman, so injured by an act of violence that it took 18 surgeries to release her head and fingers, she has spent her life not in hatred and bitterness, but instead becoming a storyteller, telling about her experience of the bomb and its aftermath that nations might desist from war and no more bombs be ever dropped. It didn't just happen, that she would find this particular path out of her pain and suffering. It was a choice. She, like Jacob, refused to let go of her struggle until out of the darkness of her nightmare, she saw a path towards light and hope and a better way.

Most of us, our stories of pain and struggle, they're not so big as this woman's. But that does not make them insignificant. I've seen people crippled, not only with a limp but also with bitterness, anger, and hopelessness, over what most of us would consider a small sorrow or disappointment. The point is that

it's not our life's circumstance that dictates what we become, but our choice, our will to wrestle with whatever demons beset us till the darkness is over and the night is past, and we have gained a place of blessing.

And God, where is God in this? It is the promise of our faith that God is not responsible for our bad decisions, or for the difficulties life hands us. God does not will bad things to happen to us just to see how we react. God is instead our sparring partner in the long night of the soul as we struggle to make sense of what has been and what can be. And the God of Jacob remade as Israel, the God of Jesus who was put to death and born to new life, and our God, that God will not leave us alone; and like those who have gone before us, we can prevail, and out of the stuff even of pain and death, we can instead find hope, new purpose, and yes, even blessing. Thanks be to God. Amen.