

“MARKED BY GOD”
Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5
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Two days ago, I was waiting in line at the Safeway pharmacy, a ahead of me in the line was a man of indeterminate age whose clothing spoke that he was poor. He moved skillfully on crutches; his right leg was missing from somewhere above the knee. The pharmacy staff obviously knew him well. The woman waiting on him asked him how he was today, and I know you're not supposed to listen to pharmacy conversations ahead of you, but I was curious about this man. When the pharmacy tech posed her question, he answered with a smile that lit his whole face. "The sun is shining," he answered. "I have everything I need. It's a good day." And the transaction over, he skillfully pushed his cart before him and continued on his way.

It was one of those random moments that make you take stock. I don't know what this man's story was, how he came to lose his leg, what was his means of support or the nature of a support system of family and friends he had or didn't have around him. I only know that in that moment, here was a man who, at an initial summary glance, had reason to be bitter or depressed or feel sorry for himself. And in the entire two minutes of our non-relationship, he showed none of those things, only openness, thanksgiving, and confidence.

Our scripture lesson from Genesis this morning is Jacob wrestling with God. Let me put this story in some context for you. This is the same Jacob who stole his brother's birthright, who plotted with his mother to deceive his father. This is the Jacob who, having done the slimy deed, hightailed it out of town and met God for the first time out in the middle of nowhere—nowhere geographically, nowhere in his life. Suddenly, unexpectedly, in his life, the distance between heaven and earth was breached by a ladder, and the Holy moved freely up and down that space, and Jacob was changed.

We know he was changed, because when he worked for his kinsman Laban, and agreed to work seven years to win Rachel as his bride, and Laban deceived him and gave him Leah instead, Jacob didn't plot or scheme. He set his back to it, accepted Leah, and worked seven more years for his Rachel. Now a wealthy man, Jacob left Laban, and set himself to return to the land of his youth, and confront the evil of his past: to make amends to his brother. This night, Jacob had sent his family and all he possessed across the river to safety—another sign of change—and he prepared to spend the night before confronting his brother alone, vulnerable, a man with all exterior props and defenses removed, and only his own resources, his own self, to bring to the battle that comes upon him. This is no random battle. Jacob didn't know what would happen when he faced his brother in the morning. So all night long, we are told, Jacob wrestled with God, with his past, with all that he had done and all that had been done to him: with his culpability, his capacity for jealousy, his capricious wanting, and what that wanting had cost him and others. The life he had run away from both geographically and emotionally, he was finally ready to confront, and at the end of that long dark night's battle, he emerged with a blessing and a promise. He was made new, given a new name: Israel. But he also emerged with a limp, a halting gait that would remain with him forever alongside the blessing and the promise. For yes, Jacob had seen the face of God; he had come victorious through the long dark night of the soul. And yes, he had emerged

able and ready to face whatever future lay before him. But such enlightenment, the struggle won in his heart and soul, it did not come to him without a cost. It was painful; it was difficult, and in its significance, it left its indelible mark on him.

I would guess that most, if not all of you here, have been at least once in your life in Jacob's shoes. Some chain of events that you have set in motion, or circumstances beyond your control that have set you on a journey not of your choosing, one or the other or both have overwhelmed you in the dark of night, and you, we, struggle to find both our own true face and God's in the darkness. Even Jesus was there, we know, crying from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." We wrestle to make meaning out of the events of our lives. We wrestle to find a safe place to stand in the midst of chaos and/or pain. We wrestle to find our best selves when it would be so much easier to slide into self-pity, bitterness, blaming, anger, or hopelessness.

And what is remarkable both in Jacob's story and our own is that so often we do prevail. It can be done. We can find newness and even blessing in unexpected ways and in the most incongruous places. No, we don't have total control over what happens in our lives, and alongside of that, we too often are the authors of the pain that comes to us. But if we turn and face our darkness, if we choose to take on the struggle to make positive meaning of even the worst of our lives, and we bring everything we have to the struggle, with God's help, we can control what we make of what has happened or what is right now happening in our lives. We can find meaning, and new and better ground on which to stand. And, because the Bible is not a Hallmark card, because our sacred scripture tells the truth, like Jacob, the marks of our spiritual struggles never leave us. Jacob walked forever with a limp. Even in resurrection, Jesus bore the marks of the cross on his hands and feet. I think of the man at the Safeway pharmacy, wishing the pharmacy tech a good day, and moving along, going about the, for him, ordinary work of pushing his shopping cart before him, balanced on his crutches. Whatever his story, you could see some visible sign of his struggle.

For most of us though, our marks, our scars are internal, invisible to others. And there's part of me that wishes that were different. In the Safeway, you could see people deliberately moving out of the way or offering assistance to the one-legged man crutching along with his cart. How differently would we behave with each other, how much more care would we take of and with each other, if we knew, if we could see the marks of each other's struggles in faith and doubt and pain? So many people carry the invisible limp of battles undertaken that we will never know about. I have a vision of all of us, moving with uneven gait through grocery store aisles, down city streets, even in church, aware of each other in a new way. So the story of Jacob is not just the story of our ability to struggle and prevail. It is also a caution to us to treat each other kindly, carefully, because if the whole truth were known, even at our strongest, we all bear, "Fragile. Handle with care" stamped in invisible ink across our foreheads.

In the end, Jacob was reconciled with his brother Esau—a tribute to both of them and their ability to overcome and make positive meaning out of the pain of the past. I like to think of the two of them, limping side by side through the wilderness, helping each other over rocky and uneven ground, forging a new and better future together. I want to believe that we, all of us, can draw courage and strength from their story, the will to live into our best selves, to face into even the most difficult realities of our lives, knowing there is no place so remote or dark or terrifying to us

that God cannot meet us there, and be our sparring partner until we find what is new, what is better, what gives life even in the most painful moments of our story. And, finally, I would hope that in the memory of our struggles and the knowledge of our own limps and scars, we find within ourselves a new well of compassion, a compassion that bubbles always upward and spills out and over with healing grace. The story of Jacob can ultimately be our story if we but choose it. Thanks be to God. Amen.