

Genesis 32:22-31

“Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care, And bids me at my Father’s throne, make all my wants and wishes known.” (Hymn “Sweet hour of Prayer”)

Jacob prays in his dark night of the soul, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”



Rembrandt van Rijn, (1606-1669)
Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, 1659, Berlin

(Genesis 32:26). What we remember about Jacob is the song, “Jacob’s ladder” which is about the angels ascending and descending on a ladder to heaven, and this story of Jacob’s wrestling with an angel.

But I want to remind us of where Jacob was before this story of perseverance. What happened right before this episode is that Jacob is trying to get away from his father-in-law Laban. He felt that God had called him to go back home to the land of his father Isaac and to live out the covenant that was handed down by his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Now, you might remember from your Sunday School days that Jacob was not first in line for the inherited covenant keeping. That was

supposed to go to his older brother Esau, but Jacob and his mother Rebecca had tricked Esau out of his birthright. Esau and Jacob were twins and Esau was born first. So Esau, you might expect, was out to get Jacob. Now Jacob had indeed burned some bridges at home, so as he headed home, he sent messengers ahead to give them a heads up. So the messengers return to Jacob and say that they have seen Esau and he is coming with 400 men. Jacob of course, was scared to death. So in a strategic move, he divided the people who were with him; as well as the flocks and herds and camels, into two groups, and the thinking was, “If Esau comes to the one camp and destroys it, then the camp that is left will be able to get away.” (*The Message*).

So now our passage for today is a turning point for Jacob. Jacob doesn't have the strongest faith among the Hebrew people. All the encounters he has had with God up to this point have either been dreams or visions- we have nothing in the text that says Jacob has ever talked with God face to face. But now, Jacob, maybe in a foxhole of sorts, (where they say even atheists learn to pray)... Jacob, our self-serving, self-persevering, self-sustaining patriarch-to-be; *for the first time* in his life, admits that he needs help... and he turns to God in prayer. And, this is no ordinary prayer.

Jacob pours out his fears to God. He admits he is vulnerable and reminds God that God has stood by him always and he reminds God that he felt that God was the one who had called him to go home where his brother was. But he's scared to death. And yet he boldly reminds God that God has promised to be with him. It seems that God has even promised him descendants that are too numerous to count. And so Jacob perseveres through the night as his wrestles with God, confident in God's promises.

The angel asks Jacob his name. Oh Jacob knows who he is alright. "Jacob" means trickster, supplanter, the one who grabs at the heel, in reference to grabbing Esau's heel at their birth, trying to hold him back. So, it's like a confession when Jacob says his name, admits who he is, admits his sin. Then God, or the angel gives Jacob a new name that shows his future. Israel—meaning persevered.

When the authors of Genesis shaped the story of Jacob at Penuel, they did so in part to account for the new name the patriarch received after besting God in combat. "Your name is not Jacob any longer; *you are Israel*, for you fought with God and humans and prevailed." Jacob's new name was not just for him. Claimed by his children and their children, it became the spacious name of a chosen people, and Jacob became a "corporate personality."

Thus, as later scriptures attest, Jacob's contentiousness is Israel's stormy history with Yahweh. His refusal to let God go is the people clinging to the covenant. God's blessing is their very existence. However personal it was -- intimate, mysterious, life-changing -- God's ambush of Jacob at Jabbok was not a private experience. It was also his people's; "You are Israel," God said to Jacob; and we are too.

So this is a story of God's people as well as a story about one of the patriarch's. And because it's the story of a people, we were there and it happened to us. We learn that God does not despise us for our supplanting and deceit, but forever ambushes our

lives with new chances; that God does not renege on promises made even under duress; that God may slip away at daybreak, but never abandons us; that God can render us vulnerable to all our fast-approaching Esau's, the siblings we robbed of birthrights with whom we must make peace; that the gracious reunion of sinners and sinned-against is the blessing of God. You are Israel. You are God's people. You are blessed.

That goes for us as well as the patriarchs of the Hebrew people of long ago. God has promised blessings for us as well. So what can we learn from this story? Several things come to mind. First, it's ok to struggle with God in prayer. Second, it's ok to hang onto God awaiting the promises. Third, we are to pray without ceasing.

I don't know about you, but I've spent many a night struggling with God and weeping for the night and waiting until morning sheds some light on my situation.

I know I've hung onto God even when my life was difficult. I've never blamed God for whatever happened in my life, because no matter how hard things have been at times, I needed God to be my rock, my fortress, my anchor.

I've always prayed, but I don't pray always. Scripture tells us to pray without ceasing, to remember to thank God for our blessings, to pray to God for our needs, to ask God not to let us go, even when we let God go. The old hymn, "Sweet hour of prayer," reminds us that "In seasons of distress and grief my soul has often found relief. And oft escaped the tempter's snare by thy return, sweet hour of prayer." And so let us pray more and give thanks more and ask God to bless us. Jesus said he would be with us always, and that's good enough for me. Life is difficult for all of us, but God is with us, no matter what—no matter if even we wrestle through the night until daybreak, for Psalm 139 tells us that no matter where we go to run away from God, God will never run away from us. That's good enough for me.

Let us pray: Look upon the church gathered in prayer, and grant that we, like your people Israel, may grow in the service of goodness and prevail over the evil that holds the world bound, as we await the coming of that hour when you will grant justice to you chosen ones, who cry to you day and night. Amen. [From *Prayers for Sunday and Seasons*, Year C, Peter J. Scagnelli, LTP, 1992]