

BROKEN AND BLESSED
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
August 3, 2008

Genesis 32:22-31

It has become fashionable in our day for churches to adopt a slogan, a brief phrase that proclaims the mission of that church in a few words. “The happy church . . . the people’s church.” We haven’t gotten around to having such a slogan around here, but plenty of churches have them. The slogans are usually positive: You wouldn’t want a slogan that said: “We’re the grumpy church,” although it might be interesting to peep inside to see what goes on in such a place.

Preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor admits to being a little puzzled by these slogans, and wonders if they can really be true. No church, she says correctly, can be happy all the time. Maybe, she observes, churches ought to adopt slogans that are a little more truthful even if they are not so upbeat. She suggests that a church might adopt the slogan: “Enter at your own risk” or my favorite: “We’re doing the best we can.”¹ A church like that might be more interesting than one that bills itself as a “happy” church.

It turns out that the Old Testament nation of Israel had a slogan. In fact, their name “Israel” was their slogan. That name means something like “striving with God” or “wrestling with God.” It can also be turned around the other way: “God strives” as in “God has to wrestle with us.” Every time an Israelite spoke the name of the nation, that person was proclaiming: “We’re the people who struggle with God,” or “God is constantly struggling with us.” Not exactly upbeat, but it is honest.

That name came from this episode which we read today, the story of Jacob wrestling with—well, who? A man? An angel? God’s very self? The text never makes it clear, which only adds to the mystery of this wild and primitive story.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*. (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998), p. 21-2.

You recall the background that leads to this moment. Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of the blessing of the firstborn, and had to flee for his life when Esau threatened to kill him. For 20 years Jacob lived far from home, laboring for his uncle Laban. And in that time, Jacob marries, takes two wives in fact, has a passel of children, and becomes a wealthy man with herds of cattle and sheep.

And then the day comes when Jacob decides that he must return home to face his brother. Jacob had come to this land alone, but now he returns with this huge assembly of people and possessions. And as he gets closer to home and to Esau, the anxiety rises in his throat. How will Esau receive him? Does Esau still have a murderous intent against him? Jacob tries to soften Esau up by sending ahead a present of some of his flocks.

Those who deliver this peace offering return with the word that Esau is coming out to meet him along with 400 others. That doesn't sound very comforting. So Jacob divides his retinue into three groups, in the hope that if one group is attacked, the others might get safely away. On the night before he is to meet Esau, he gets his family and his flocks safely across the Jabbock, a tributary of the Jordan River. And on that night, filled with fear about the impending meeting with Esau, Jacob is left alone.

Jacob is consumed by thoughts of this upcoming encounter with his brother, but he must face another encounter first. This being, identified only as a man, comes upon him and they wrestle until the break of day. It has a strange and otherworldly quality about it. Let us note only two things about this story. First, Jacob asks for and receives the blessing of this wrestling being. And as a sign of the blessing, his name is changed. No longer Jacob, the heel-grabber; but Israel, the one who strives with God, the one with whom God wrestles.

The other thing is this: The wrestling match leaves him wounded. When the opponent finds that he cannot beat Jacob, he uses what sounds like an unfair tactic, not unlike those professional wrestling matches where one fighter will pull some mysterious object from his trunks and gouge the face of the opponent. In this case, the man touches Jacob/Israel on the hip and cripples him. So when the day breaks and the opponent vanishes, Jacob sets off to meet Esau, and he limps as he goes. This thing could almost have been a dream, except that the limp is real, and Jacob will have it the rest of his life.

Karl Barth sees Jacob's limp as the way the life of faith works. "While Esau strides powerfully through the world," he writes, "God dislocates the hip of the saints so that they walk with a limp."²

We've had a good time looking at some of the stories of Jacob that lead up to this event. Jacob is the trickster, quick on his feet, wily and able to outsmart brother and father and uncle. Jacob is the way we would like to be—a cool customer, a smooth and savvy James Bond who can talk or fight his way out of any situation.

But no longer. From now on Jacob will walk with a limp. Maybe he had thought that he could use his glib tongue to sweet talk Esau. Or, if that didn't work, he could use his two good legs to propel himself to safety. But sweet-talking, fast-moving Jacob is no more. In his place is Israel, the one who strives with God and has got the wounds to show for it. There will be no running away this time. If he tries it, strong Esau will quickly be able to close the distance.

Sometimes you can run away from something you're scared of. But sometimes you can't. "I wish things would just go back to the way they were before." But they're not. Sometimes the only way is not out but through. Sometimes the only thing to do is to face the music. And it is just there, just when we know that our human ability and agility will not do, that we find the power of God that is present with us.

The apostle Paul carried in his body some ailment. No one has ever been sure exactly what it was. Some have proposed that Paul suffered from epilepsy. Others have said that Paul was made partially blind from the light that shone on him on the road to Damascus. Whatever it was, here is how Paul talks about it:

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.³

² *Church Dogmatics*, IV. 2. p. 576.

³ II Corinthians 12:7-10.

This story of Jacob wrestling with the angel is so ancient and so mysterious that we make a mistake if we think we can explain what is here. It is well to leave it in all its primitive wildness.

But we are invited to ponder here the connection between our gifts and our wounds, between being blessed and being broken. Our usual idea is that the world wounds us, and we want God to send the ambulance so that we will be well and whole again. But here, Jacob discovers a God who is right in the middle of the woundedness. Here, to encounter God is to be both blessed and broken.

John Calvin's younger colleague, Theodore Beza, said that as the old reformer lay dying, he cried out, "O Lord, your hand is heavy upon me. O Lord, your hand bruise me." And then in a quieter voice he said: "Nevertheless, it is enough to know that it is your hand."⁴

The centerpiece of our faith is an act of brokenness that we will observe again next week when we gather around this table. "This is my body, broken for you." Jesus could not bless without himself being broken.

So next week remember, when you come to this table. If you think you're cool, if you've got it made, if you can live by your quick wits and quick feet, then you're too strong, too good, too together to come to the table of the Lord. It is only when we know our weakness and brokenness that we can hear the invitation of Christ: "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

There are plenty of times when life's struggles leaves us broken. It is just in those times that we are invited to look up and to see that the one with whom we struggle is God, who comes just in the struggle to bless us and to set us free. †

⁴ Albert Curry Winn tells this account in a class on Reformed Spirituality, Columbia Theological Seminary.