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Dreaded Exultations

Psalm 145: 8-14 & Genesis 32:22-31

The famous line at the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities* is “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Most of us have had experiences of the ‘best of times’ and experiences of the ‘worst of times’, and sometimes almost at the same time.

Well, that was what Jacob was going through, “the best of times and the worst of times.” He was a wealthy man – his flocks of animals were immense. He had 2 wives and 2 servant women with whom he had had at least 11 sons and 1 daughter. He was finally able to leave the forced employ of his father-in-law and go back home. This certainly would be thought of as a ‘best of times’ time for him. But his journey home was not without some fear and trepidation. He was going to have to face his brother, Esau, whom he had wronged over 14 years ago. This would seem to be a ‘worst of times’ time for him.

To catch us up to this point in the life of Jacob I want to give a little family history. It is a well-known story as we find it in chapters 25-32 in Genesis. As I relate it to you, I want to extend recognition to John Bodo for his telling of this story:

Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright by refusing to share his lentil stew until Esau had signed over his birthright. “A few years later, Jacob cheated Esau out of their dying father’s blessing – a very significant blessing which belonged to the firstborn son – a blessing which none of the other sons could share. But along with his mother, Rebekah, Jacob contrived to fool the nearly blind Isaac into thinking he was Esau. No wonder Jacob thought it prudent to flee after that act: Esau had threatened to kill him.

Then while staying with his uncle Laban, Rebekah’s brother, and working for this uncle, Jacob managed to become wealthy. Jacob was a scrapper and a rogue, but his character was not without excuse. For one thing, it is difficult to be a younger son – especially the younger of just two – in a culture where the firstborn son sits in the driver’s seat and all others must ride in the baggage trunk.

And it seems as if father Isaac discriminated against Jacob in a most un-fatherly way. Isaac loved tough he-man Esau who was always out hunting and bringing his father choice morsels of game. Jacob, growing up, seems to have hung around the family tents and been spoiled rotten by Rebekah. It was Rebekah who put Jacob up to tricking Isaac into giving Isaac the blessing meant for Esau. Jacob was most willing to go along, but it had really been his mother’s idea. And even his eventual cheating of uncle Laban was more than a little justified. Laban had both cheated and exploited Jacob. After greeting Jacob as a young kinsman and signing him on, Laban agreed that Jacob should work for him for 7 years for his younger daughter, Rachel, with whom Jacob had fallen in love.

But then on their wedding night, old Laban sent his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob’s tent so that in the morning Jacob found himself married to Leah instead of Rachel.

So Laban got another 7 years of free work out of Jacob so he could marry Rachel, the woman he really loved. And, Jacob was such a first-rate manager of Laban's estate that he made his uncle rich. Thus, when Jacob felt that, at last, it was time for him to go home – that just maybe Esau's wrath might have cooled – he tricked uncle Laban out of some of his sheep.

So Jacob, more scoundrel than saint, one whose name suggested rivalry and conflict, who was a cheater, was returning to the land he had fled, the land promised to him by God. He was fearful & anxious; but always shrewd and planning; and he covered himself by praying to this God who had appeared to him when he had fled his homeland those many years ago. He was overwhelmed by the thought of his impending meeting with his brother.

And as he prepared to meet Esau, he fell back on his own wits again, as he tried to appease his brother with countless gifts in hopes that Esau would not kill him. Jacob had learned that Esau was coming with at least 400 men to meet him. It is this feared encounter with Esau that forms the context for the scripture reading this morning and the encounter at the River Jabbok.

Jacob, overcome with fear and a strong sense of foreboding, sent everyone on ahead of him and remained alone on the other side of the river. And night fell on him. And he had this most different and unexpected encounter that caught him unprepared. He was the object of a divine revelation in that dangerous time of night. The one who came to him, a male figure, was terrifying, hidden and unknown. The narrative is not explicit, is deliberately vague when it comes to this opponent, which adds to the dread and fear already felt when the name and face of the opponent are not known.

The opponent is said to be a man; one with the power to touch Jacob's thigh out of joint, and with power to bless him; one who feared the daylight; one who refused to give his name; and one who said to Jacob that he had striven with God. And Jacob later said that he had seen God face to face.

Walter Brueggemann has written of encounters in the dark such as this one: “In the night the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day.”

Well, Jacob was probably still struggling with his father, Isaac, and with his mother, Rebekah. He had not left home in the best of circumstances and family matters were still unsettled. And, of course, Jacob had to be wrestling with Esau because of what he had done to his brother and how he had cheated Esau out of what was rightfully his.

But it was with more than his family that he had to wrestle. The God who had appeared to him at Bethel those many years ago when he fled from Esau and to whom he had prayed - really was the one there to prevent him from getting back into the land promised to him until his older trickster and cheater nature was subdued. This unknown assailant seemed to be intent on preventing Jacob's further journey.

Jacob began his desperate nighttime struggle with his nameless opponent, and the wrestling lasted all night long. Frightened, Jacob held his own against the other. Jacob fought with tremendous, almost superhuman strength against his heavenly opponent, though it was not until almost the end of the encounter that Jacob realized that his opponent was a divine being. This, one, Jacob, who was strong, bright and cunning; who was proud, self-confident, and self-sufficient, who was still running from himself and from God, came to realize that by coming to him in this way God was not going to let him alone. We see in this nocturnal encounter the truth that we can never hide from God, even at night. We may hide from ourselves and others at night, but even then God will come after us, as God

finally did with Jacob. Jacob must have come to realize that after the fight had gone on for so long that he could not win it by his own power, strength, and/or wits. And yet amazingly enough, his divine opponent had not been able to defeat Jacob.

Then several incredible things happen at the end of the fight. At the very beginning of daybreak the opponent desired to end the fight, likely as he did not want to be seen in the daylight. So to gain an advantage, he struck Jacob on the thigh. The injury was serious enough that Jacob could not be declared the winner. This injury to his thigh may have also damaged vital organs and thus affected his manhood and future. John Bodo has written that the injury became a loss of power. Jacob was no longer a complete and whole man. He was now limited. He would not be able to do anything and everything he wanted to do. He came to realize that he was a weakened and mortal man, one who would need help, help from others, and, most importantly, help from God.

After the injury had been inflicted and they were exhausted from their lengthy struggle, the two combatants began to talk. The unnamed opponent wanted Jacob to let him go – he definitely wanted to be released before daybreak. But Jacob would not let him go. He hung on to the man with any and all strength that he had left. He knew that as a result of the injury, he was, as already stated, limited and in need of the help of others, of God. So he wanted to be blessed, to receive the heavenly favor, that assurance of divine presence and support. He hung on, continued the fight for the blessing he had originally stolen, now assumed was his, and needed to hear reaffirmed so he might face his brother. Jacob had not forgotten the wrong he had done to Esau and he still needed this blessing to overcome the judgment under which he stood. He had to fight it out to the very end until the blessing came from God so he could face his brother, and come to terms with him. But the adversary did not respond to Jacob's demand. Instead he inquired of Jacob's name – a strange inquiry from a divine being whom one would expect to know such things. There are a couple of things which must be said about names and the power of names, as understood in Old Testament times. The person and a name were so closely linked that the name contained something of the character of the one who bore it.

So in giving his name, Jacob revealed his nature – one who cheated, schemed, and so forth. And knowing the name of someone, or a deity, or a thing, somehow gave one some control over that person, deity or thing. Jacob did not hesitate to give his name, to let the other know him and have some measure of control over him. This may have been part of a decision to let go and to allow God to be in control of his life. This was understood by the other, for the adversary then gave Jacob a new name. The change was from Jacob – meaning: heel (of the foot), trickster, supplanter, one who was devious; to Israel – meaning God rules, God preserves, God protects, or God struggles. This change in name signified the divine understanding of the change of character in Jacob.

Now it must be acknowledged that Jacob did not undergo a complete change of character, have a total transformation of his personality. But he now understood the importance of God in his life and did not want to let God go. As Walter Brueggemann has written, "Israel is the one who has faced God, been touched by God, prevailed, gained a blessing, and been renamed. Something new is underway, new possibilities are now open, and Jacob has a new power gained from the encounter."

Then Jacob, bolstered by his divine name change, boldly asked the name of his opponent. He wanted to know God's name, to know something more of this God who had come into his life and so have some understanding of God. By wanting to know God's name, it would seem that Jacob wanted to have some power, some control over God. But the request also showed the human longing and desire for God. Have we not all had those times when we have wanted more understanding, a clearer picture, a desire to know who God is and why God does what it is God does? But the adversary would

remain unnamed. Not having lost, the opponent would not reveal his name to Jacob. He would not give up his mystery and freedom.

Then most unexpectedly, the being granted Jacob's first request and blessed him. The being came to understand that Jacob now knew that one could not trick God out of a blessing. Rather, one had to be honest, willing to admit one's own helplessness, and pray for the blessing one could not acquire on one's own.

After the encounter, Jacob was not as a proud conqueror. For in the encounter Jacob experienced the wonder and awesomeness of being face to face with God, and still remaining alive. This made him humble and diminished him. But as a determined and now blessed man, he was able to limp off to the meeting with Esau. Jacob was able to walk into the sunrise and ask for Esau's forgiveness. Jacob succeeded in this test of his fitness for the larger tasks that lay ahead of him. He survived this grace-filled assault. And he was left with an injury that would always remind him of what had taken place. His meeting with God, his wrestling with God, left him wounded.

We are people who have known struggle in our lives, as Jacob knew struggle. Life has as part of it conflict, struggle, and strife. Sometimes, like Jacob, we do not know who or what we struggle with, and the name of that which confronts us. But in this story, Jacob is telling us, "Do not let go." Continue in the struggle, even if it is God with whom you struggle and God is experienced as threatening. For as a John Gibson has written:

A blessing, like the one Jacob received, at times comes to those at the end of their ropes, to those who have tried all other routes to happiness and achievement and still not found contentment. They then come to realize that only God can provide the strength for the living of the day. They hang in there, refusing to take NO for an answer from God. And like Jacob, they dare to contend against God. For they know that the struggle, even with God may end with a blessing. Even though they have learned from Jacob that the struggle with God may cost them, that they might always bear the scars of the battle afterwards, they are still willing to risk in order to receive that blessing. It is worth it to experience the dreaded exultations, exulting because God is encountered; dreaded because the outcome is unknown.

At the end of this part of the Jacob story, we need to ask ourselves this question that John Gibson posed: "Dare we be as challenging in our relationship with God as was Jacob?"

It is a hard question. God is not to be taken lightly or easily. God can be one who cripples as well as one who blesses. Jacob was successful in his divine encounter, but he went away limping. We also realize from this story, as Walter Brueggemann wrote – "that seeing God is not a timid experience that leaves one unscathed."

And we know that we have to reckon with God in life. We cannot ignore God or leave God out of our lives.

The Good News is that our encounters with God will bring new weakness – we will learn more of human limitations. But, these encounters also will bring a new power, that of our humble, serving, risen Lord, and they will bring a newness to our lives, that of the cleansing, blowing freshness of the Holy Spirit. It will be by these encounters, even those like that of Jacob, that we will come to know God as personal, never far away. We will come to know God as the One who directs and shepherds us in our lives, even when we do not recognize this. And we will come to know God as One whose love refuses to let us go.

So never let us forget in all the dreaded exultations of our lives that God is there, present with us, coming into our lives, blessing us, and loving us as only God can.