

“Struggling with Mystery”
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 32:22-31
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Jacob is a heel.

In the ancient Hebrew, *ya-kov* means *he takes by the heel*. Jacob came into the world gripping the heel of his twin brother Esau, intent apparently on making Esau do most of the hard work while he reaped the rewards.

He was a heel when, after a long day working, Esau came home and asked Jacob for some food, and Jacob made him give him the birthright that was Esau’s by custom in exchange for food.

And he was a heel when, on his father’s deathbed, Jacob took advantage of the blindness of his father and dressed up as Esau to steal the blessing meant for Esau.

Where some may see Jacob as a freeloader, others see an opportunist.

Jacob’s deliberate deceptions help him survive. To be “a quiet man, living in tents” rather than “a skillful hunter [and] man of the field” in the context of the ancient world meant that Jacob was at a social and cultural disadvantage. He needed to rely on brains rather than brawn to make it.

After Jacob steals his blessing, Esau swears to kill him; Jacob gets wind of Esau’s motives, and he bolts. Along the way Jacob manages to build family and prosperity for himself.

But his brother keeps coming. And it seems that the peace offering he sends back to his brother—slaves and livestock—haven’t assuaged Esau’s rage. So Jacob decides to finally stop running, and before he meets his brother in the morning, he wrestles with a mysterious stranger all through the night. Whether he stops running because he’s now disabled at the hip, or because he’s finally ready to face his brother, the text doesn’t say.

What the text does is, itself, a bit mysterious. You see, the authors and editors of this story don’t identify the stranger as God; only Jacob does so after the fact. Jacob chooses to see this random encounter that leaves him physically altered as an encounter with God.

At least two things change after this struggle with a mysterious stranger: Jacob faces Esau and is reconciled with him; and Jacob is no longer Jacob, but *Israel*. The *Israelites* can therefore be understood to be a people who wrestle, who struggle, who strive with God. At least from my perspective, these two details belong together. For Jacob-now-Israel is no longer an individual—whether you label him freeloader or opportunist. Israel is now a people, a community, and the person of Jacob a strand of thread woven into a tapestry of relationship. It would seem that is in Israel’s choosing to provide safety for his household and to face his struggles with his brother that he becomes a people.

Are we part of a people? It seems that, at present, those of us born as citizens of this country are struggling mightily with that question. But if Jacob-now-Israel’s story has anything to teach us in our present moment, it is that running from the collective consequences of our historical actions will not resolve our conflicts. It will simply perpetuate them, and in the process force us into ever more isolated groups.

Are we part of a family? It seems that those of us whose family stories are difficult, complex, unresolved, struggle mightily with that question. But if this story can speak even to our more personal circumstances, what might it say: to those of us who wished for children, but had none? To those whose relationships with parents or siblings followed the opposite trajectory of Jacob's, moving from closeness to estrangement or enmity? What might it mean to have to endure the inevitable disabling of our bodies right at the times when we would most have wished to lean on them for support? Are we running from the great griefs of our lives, or are we actively wrestling with them?

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Take a look, just for a few moments, at the person sitting next to you. Don't worry, keep it brief, laugh or scowl or roll your eyes as is your wont. If you're by yourself or don't want to look, close your eyes and imagine the face of someone you know.

Look at the eyes... behold! Whether they are running from or wrestling with or incapacitated by the slings and arrows of life...behold a stranger, struggling with depths of mysteries that mirror yours: they share this space with you.

Open your eyes and refocus your gaze; how now will you act? Will you choose to protect whom you can in your circle of support? Perhaps you still need to run a bit to get to higher ground before you're ready to face the mystery that haunts your steps. Or perhaps you'll never know whether or not you're ready, and you're willing to wrestle with the mysteries, even if they seem to weaken you.

I deem the greatest mystery of Jacob's story not the identity of the stranger with whom he wrestles, but all that may have transpired in the life of Esau to change his mind and turn his heart toward compassion. Because in the verses that follow today's portion of the story, Esau brings 400 men with him to his meeting with Jacob...and rather than take Jacob by force, Esau embraces Jacob and kisses him. The story was leading toward a conclusion similar to that of the Cain and Abel saga...and instead Esau chooses to belong to his brother. Perhaps, for the first time, Esau saw in his brother's fear-filled face a reflection of his own struggles.

When Jesus sat at table with his disciples—whether or not he knew the terror of what was about to take place—he bound people together. This is what we practice when we break the bread and share the cup with one another: no matter our heritage or choices or station, we commit ourselves to the wellbeing of each other. We become a people in support of all people, indeed all creation. In the name of Jesus, in whom we see God, we offer one another spiritual mystery in the forms of food and drink.

Wherever you are, whomever you are, remember that you are part of a people who are called not to ignore or to run from, but to struggle with the mysteries of life—and to dare to see God at work in the struggle.

Whether as a people trying to make sense of these perilous times, or as individuals wrestling with the unresolved mysteries of life, perhaps our greatest struggle is doing the quiet, diligent, faithful work to belong to one another. May we find strength for this struggle at the table, as we bind ourselves to one another, and to God. Amen.