

## Wrestling with God

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*Genesis 32:22-31 — The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

I like to think that there are two different kinds of stories: there are stories with a lower-case “s,” and there are Stories with a capital “S.” Most of the stories we tell are stories with a lower-case “s”: what happened on my way to the store yesterday, how last weekend’s trip went, that time I embarrassed myself in front of someone I cared about. Lower-case “s” stories are the ones that aren’t particularly formative for us. Their content may matter, but they haven’t significantly shaped our lives or our identities. Capital “S” Stories, on the other hand, are the narratives that tell people who we are, where we’ve come from, how we’ve changed, and where we’re going. A capital “S” Story is about something that if it hadn’t happened, you wouldn’t be the same person that you are today.

I’d like to share with you one of my most precious capital “S” Stories. If you read the September issue of the Bordentown Current, then you’ve heard a version of this Story, but I want to share it from the pulpit as well. When I was less than one year old, my dad began teaching theology at Austin College, a Presbyterian liberal arts school in Sherman, Texas. As a new professor, he often worked late into the night, planning his lectures for the next day. While keeping these night hours, he met Annabelle Wilson, a 60-year-old black woman who worked as a night-time janitor at the college. She was devout, warm, and tenacious. Annabelle had been a lifelong member of Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, and she was thrilled to befriend a Christian co-worker in my dad. Frequently, she would say to him, “Steve, before you die, you have to come and hear my pastor preach.” Now, my dad, having been raised Presbyterian and having never stepped foot in a black church before, would typically respond with something like, “Yeah, Annabelle, we should do that sometime.” Eventually, though, due to her persistence, my dad accepted the invitation.

So, one Sunday morning, he and my mom, with their three-year-old daughter and infant me, drove to Greater New Hope Church — just a handful of blocks away from the college, but very clearly in a different part of town. Unbeknownst to them, as they drove to Greater New Hope, my parents passed a large tree, just a block and a half away from the church, where a black man had been lynched only 60 years earlier. On that Sunday morning, there were 150 or so people in the old sanctuary, and we were the only white people there. My parents took in the service with wide-eyed curiosity and wide-open hearts. Afterwards, they drove home in silence. And when they got home, they looked at each other and burst into tears: they knew that God had called them.

And that's the Story — capital "S" — of how I was raised at Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, the only white boy in a black congregation. My faith, my relationships, my thoughts, my passions, all of me has been profoundly shaped by this Story. It's one that I'll tell people for the rest of my life, because if people really want to know me, they've got to know this Story.

What we read in Genesis 32 this morning was a capital "S" Story for Jacob, for two reasons: first, because he was given a new name, and second, because he was left with a limp. In Hebrew, the name "Jacob" means "one who deceives" — which is fitting, because Jacob tried to cheat his brother Esau out of his inheritance, and then left town for 20 years. In our passage this morning, Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau for the first time since he left town, and Jacob is afraid that his brother still wants to kill him. On the way, though, Jacob is confronted by this mysterious divine figure, who engages him in a wrestling match. In light of this, Jacob's new name is fitting as well. In Hebrew, the name "Israel" means "God struggles," "God strives," or "God contends." Sometimes, God comes to us in a take-me-by-the-hand kind of way: peaceful, assuring, soothing. But other times, as Jacob found out, God comes to us in ways that throw us off balance. From Jacob, we learn that, however God comes to us, we are meant to engage.

And Jacob does. He wrestles back, struggling with all of his might. And in fact, halfway through the night, he seems to be doing just fine. Apparently, Jacob is up to the task of wrestling with God. So, to make things even more interesting and bizarre, God reaches out and touches Jacob's hip, which is immediately displaced from its socket. But Jacob keeps wrestling! And then, talk about a shocking finish: it looks like Jacob prevails—against God. And God commends him for it, blessing Jacob as God blessed his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. This blessing is God's promise that God will make a great nation out of their descendants and that they will be God's beloved people, who work to bless the world. It's a victory for Jacob, but it takes a toll on him. He is limping, and it seems that he keeps limping long after that night.

Now, I used to think, "Oh, poor Jacob." But really, that limp was the physical sign of Jacob's capital-S Story. That limp was the sign that he had wrestled with God, prevailed, and received God's blessing. That limp is what made Jacob Israel. Friends, this story reminds us that the limps, the scars, the wounds that we have received from our own struggles can become a part of our capital "S" Story. These wounds are not shameful. In fact, they may help us be a blessing to

others who need what we have gained through our struggles. They may help us grow in humility or patience or compassion. They may help us connect with Christ in a new and powerful way — as Christ himself was resurrected with scars on his hands and feet.

Whether or not we have lived a story as bizarre as this one in Genesis, let us remember that our Story — capital-S — is meant to be marked by our own wrestling matches — with God, with our demons, with the challenges in our lives. The Spirit of God comes to us as we wrestle, and sometimes we walk away with a limp. But despite that limp, or perhaps through that limp, we are blessed and are called to be a blessing to others. Amen.