

Busted Hips

Today's reading from Genesis, the story of Jacob that we've been hearing these last several weeks, comes to roost on what happens when anyone, you, me or Jacob, makes the move from trusting in ourselves to trusting in God.

Jacob is one of the great figures in history.

And, if you didn't know you were hearing it from the Bible, you might think the story of Jacob came from Norman Mailer or Jackie Collins or some other author who specializes in the nasty side of life.

Here's Jacob, right from the womb, grabbing on to his brother's heel, trying, but failing to be the first born in a culture where being first means everything.

Failing that, he takes advantage of older brother's hunger by making him trade his birth right, his right to the blessing of Isaac, the blessing that is an irrevocable gift of all Isaac had; Jacob got Esau to trade it in for a hot bowl of chili and rice.

Jacob is one smart cookie.

And it doesn't end there.

When Isaac grows old and blind, sitting at death's door, Jacob gets dressed in some skins (to be hairy like older brother), creeps into Isaac's dark, cool tent, and fools dear old dad into giving the inheritance, the blessing, the irrevocable gift of all Isaac had, to Jacob.

Once given, it cannot be taken back.

Once given, it cannot be given again.

Understandably, Esau is furious when he finds out what happens, and even furioser when he learns that what is done cannot and will not be undone.

So Jacob leaves town. He's gone a long while.

It's during his return, many years later, that brings us to the passage we hear today.

Up til now, Jacob has managed quite well on his own.

With cunning and skill he, not Esau, got the great blessing.

With perseverance and sweat, after 14 years of work, he finally gets the beautiful, shapely, sweet natured Rachel as his wife.

But today, something changes.

Tonight, as he sleeps, something rouses Jacob.

Is it a demon?

Or an angel?

Is it a man or is it God?

We don't know.

The story suggests it might be any of them.

What we do know is that Jacob is no longer patting himself on the back for the good fortune his life has brought.

Now, he is grappling, wrestling with, what?

A demon?

An angel?

A man?

God?

The wrestling goes on the whole night long, ending, it seems, in a tie.

Exhausted, but undefeated, Jacob, whose name means “go-getter” in English, is now given the new name of “Israel,” or “the one who wrestles with God.”

But not only that.

When Moses received the law on Mount Sanai, he watched as God passed by him, seeing only God’s back, for to see God face to face is to die.

Yet, here is Jacob, having fought with this stranger the whole night long, having his hip knocked out of joint for the rest of his life, only, in the end, in the very midst of struggle and pain and injury: Jacob sees God face to face: and lives!

Which got me thinking about our community right here; and the many times we are given the grace to see God face to face.

I see the face of God in Auntie N’s wonderful humor always poking fun at herself: like her story of her wireless phones that, one after another, with only a few days use, kept dying! She called her dear friend P and told her of the problem. P asked: “N, did you charge them?” To which N replied, “Why no, I paid cash.” It took P half an hour to get off the floor from laughing...

I see the face of God in our concerned, and sometimes contentious friends, in the quiet service of the C sisters, in the vigilant eye of our property guys, in the dedication of you old timers who have brought St E’s to where it is today.

But I also see the face of God in some of our toughest neighborhood boys, who come from homes and lives that barely teach a reason to hope, to dream. I see the face of God in the gold toothed smiles of our newest members, folks just trying to figure out how to get by from day to day.

Someone remarked this week that our newest members need to change to become more like us. After all, when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

There is some truth to that.

But, the “Rome” we are all invited to live in is the Kingdom of God; and we are ALL called to change to look more like citizens of that far country.

The earliest church lived with these same struggles.

Paul wasn’t joking when he declared that the whole of creation groans in expectation for the full revealing of the Kingdom; groaning because the birth pangs of a new creation ARE painful, ARE difficult, and do require much from each of us.

Ours is a wild, untamed God.

Ours is a God content to live with weeds and wheat growing up side by side; who appears sometimes as the gentlest breeze, and sometimes as our fiercest foe.

Jacob’s story is our story too.

For in his struggle, and out of his pain, Jacob makes the fundamental exchange by trading in a lifetime of trusting in himself to the terrifying bargain of trusting in God.

And his reward is NOT more good fortune, his reward is a busted hip.

You see, when we move from relying on number one to relying on God, expect pain.

Expect bad stuff (bad stuff from our point of view, anyway) to happen.

I can’t tell you why that is so.

All I know is it’s true.

Just before I left on vacation two weeks ago, one of our members got in touch and said he'd been reading the daily lesson in his Forward Movement booklet. It seems in the reading that day, God had sent an evil spirit into King Saul.

Our member wrote (and I share this with permission):

"1 Samuel 18:5-16 is the recommended reading in today's Forward Movement of which my conundrum is based. Verse 10 of the cited reference reads as follows: "The next day an **evil spirit from God** suddenly came into Saul..." My understanding of the church's teaching is that there is no evil in God and I believe that fervently; the question in my mind becomes why does this and other passages in the Book of Samuel attribute the evil spirit emanating from God? Very puzzling; if there are reasonable explanations please share with me?"

And I thought of Jacob and his busted hip.

And I thought of our lives and times here at St. E's.

Ours is a God who gets down in the muck with us, who wrestles with us, who won't hesitate to knock us around so that we might wake up to see that God is far more mysterious, far stranger, far more challenging than we usually dare to believe.

Ours is a God who rejects our efforts to keep God small, who rejects our constant efforts to keep God understandable, manageable, under control.

One poet describes what Jacob sees in the face of his opponent that night "as something more terrible than the face of death – it is the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days..." Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 7.

Until this encounter, Jacob got what he wanted through cunning and shrewdness.

Until this encounter, he got what he needed by his own wits and skills.

Yet in his struggle with this demon, this man, with God, he pitched a great battle all night long, fighting to what seemed like a draw, which, if you're wrestling with God, is a heck of an achievement.

But as day draws near, the stranger simply touches the socket of his hip, and Jacob is finished.

His grip changes from one of combatant, relying on his own strength, wits, and savvy, to the grip of a drowning man, clinging for all he's worth to the only one who can save him: "Give me your blessing," he cries, in other words: "All that I am now depends on you."

In other words: "I surrender."

He didn't get there without the busted hip, and neither shall we.

Sometimes it takes what seems to be an evil thing so you and I can come to accept that while power or success or happiness, as the world knows them, belong to he who will fight for them; peace, love, joy, these are only from God. Id.

They are pure gift, which can be received only when the fist clenched for the fight is opened into the hand willing to receive.

Amen+