

NIGHT TERRORS: CAGE MATCH
GENESIS 32:22-31
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
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We continue Jacob's story, now in Genesis 32, verses 22-31. Listen for God's word:

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' ²⁷So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' ²⁸Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Those of you who were with us last week know that we're doing a two-part series, if you can call it that, on Jacob's nighttime revelations. Last week we painted a picture of Jacob's frenzied flight out of the holy land. After he stole a birthright properly belonging to his twin-brother Esau, Jacob was driven out by Esau's murderous rage. As he left the land that had been promised to him, Jacob had a wild dream where he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, and experienced God's Presence in God's radical descent.

He was a changed man after the ladder dream, but he was still Jacob. At birth, his parents gave him the name "Jacob" and it fit him well — *the supplanter, the one who overreaches, or the one who acts crookedly*, each an appropriate translation of the Hebrew patriarch's name.

I also mentioned last week that I had been haunted by an article in the 1948 November issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, "God and the American People" was a sweeping indictment of Christian ethical (in)action in the middle of the 20th century. Today I'd like to tell you about another haunting. This one is deeply personal.

Do you know *Amelia Bedilia*? Peggy Parish of Manning, South Carolina, dreamed her up in the mid 1960s and published over 40 books with Amelia as their central character. Amelia Bedilia is a maid who's also a bit of a fool. She takes everything literally — thus, when told to dust the house she does just that, adding *more* dust to the parlor. As Amelia reckons, if the Rogers family wanted the dust gone, they would have told her to "un-dust," right?

Amelia Bedilia was ubiquitous in my elementary school. She delighted young readers and their parents. You know who she didn't delight? Amelia Alice Stuckey — *me*. Every

first day of class I girded my loins and prepared for the moment at which my classmates would learn my government name, a moment that was followed each time by (in my memory) a class-wide series of taunts, linking me forever to well-meaning but unacceptably foolish Amelia Bedilia.

Now in my family we take family names seriously. Names are an honor and a destiny, a challenge to live up to the one after whom you are called. I was proud as a child to be named after the grandmother I loved and the great-grandmother who so formed the character of the my mother and her sisters.

But no one at Harbison West Elementary knew about Amelia Fuller, so it was pesky Amelia Bedilia and her dust that followed me around. Juliet may imagine “that which we call a rose / By another name would smell as sweet” but those of us alive in the 21st century know well the power of names. For some names are a point of privilege, for others a source of shame. In most cases names are formative, otherwise we would not be engaged in the critical work of examining the names we’ve plastered on public buildings, colleges, and corporations. Names have power, a reality explicitly acknowledged in ancient Near Eastern traditions and implicitly acknowledged in any number of conversations in the public forum today.

As far as Jacob goes, it’s impossible to know if he was a heel because he was so named, or he was named because his mother recognized in his infancy that this boy was a wrestler, a “heel-grabber” before even his birth. Either way, Jacob was well matched to his infamous monicker.

After all, and I can’t emphasize this enough, Jacob spent his whole life wrestling. It’s not just Genesis 32. He wrestled with Esau in the womb. He wrestled with the truth when his blind father asked him his name. After his divine dream he wrestled with his father-in-law Laban. He wrestled with his brothers-in-law, with his flocks, and with a great stone atop a well. He wrestled with his faithfulness, responding to God’s promise with a series of conditional “ifs.”

When we find Jacob today he’s making provisions for yet another match. After 20 years the heel is on his way back to the promised land. Before he can cross, however, Jacob has heard that he will have to contend with Esau, the brother whose murderous rage has followed him since the day he stole the birthright.

Last week I suggested Jacob may well be the Patron Saint of American faith. He’s an achiever, a schemer, a hustler. But in his near-constant wrestling, I see another less considered aspect of our life together. Frederick Buechner succinctly reminded us that the world can be both “beautiful and terrible.” For many of us that has practical implications: like Jacob, we have found ourselves in a life marked by near-constant wrestling.

To be clear I’m not suggesting that each of us engages in a cage match with divinity when we go to sleep at night. No, the matches in which we are engaged are far more

common. Sometimes we start the fight by our bad behavior or our inaction, causing some calamity with which we have to contend. Sometimes it's good trouble that gets us wrestling — challenging the powers that restrict the image of God in our neighbors and limit the grace-filled possibilities of the kingdom.

Often, though, we find ourselves engaged in million matches we did not choose. We wrestle with our bodies, our sense of self, our idea of worthiness. We wrestle with the voices that tell us we are not enough. Our cells wrestle within us, dividing in a million treacherous ways. We are restless in our work. We beat on the walls of grief that encircle us in loss. We wrestle with the names we've been given and the legacies they presume, we wrestle with the politicians and leaders who attempt to reduce our humanity to partisan gamesmanship.

It's a secret we often hide from one another, though each of us knows it well. To be alive, in all its glory, is a bit of a fight. We are "sinned against and sinning," in a contest with the fates.

We each of us are Jacob.
We dream and we wrestle.

And because we don't talk about it — neither our dreams nor our despair — we often convince ourselves, no matter how nonsensical, that we wrestle and dream alone.

Back, for a moment, to Jacob.
I'd like you to think about the Scripture we just read.
Pop quiz: with whom did Jacob wrestle?

The authors of Genesis tell us in verse 24 that Jacob wrestled with an "ish," the word used to describe Adam in Genesis 2. Not until the "ish" departs is he identified by Jacob as God. Rabbis suggested the "ish" was Esau's spirit, come to have it out with his usurping brother. Cultural anthropologists suggest the "ish" is an iteration of a near-eastern river demon, a prominent figure in Mesopotamian mythology. Later in Scripture the Prophet Hosea decides that Jacob wrestled an angel. But in the beach of the Jabbok, all Jacob knows is that he's wrestling with a man. That's the plain meaning word "ish" — it's not even ambiguous in Hebrew. Jacob is being acted upon and denied rest, he is engaged in an endless struggle with the form and flesh of a man.

As day breaks Jacob comes to understand something of the nature of the engagement. The English translation of the Hebrew suggests that the *ish* "struck" Jacob. The translation is violent. But the Hebrew itself is far more nuanced. Hebrew Scholar and

noted biblical translator Robert Alter suggests that the right translation is “touched,” and not just any touch, but a particularly light touch. There is something other-worldly in the touch. By the use of the verb we come to understand that this “man,” as he is called by the narrator could have ended the engagement hours earlier by deploying this touch. But he stayed in the contest.

He allowed for the dusty, dull fight. He made room for the wrestling match.
And in the engagement, the man blessed the wrestler.
Which is precisely how we know that this “ish” is God.

Jacob wrestled all his life. Only on the Jabbok did he come to realize that he never was wrestling alone. Today's narrative proclaims a profound truth: God is the one who refuses to let go. God is the man who embraces the wrestler, wraps himself around him in the midst of his fear and anxiety. God is not an aloof judge, nor an arbitrary parent, God is in the fight.

Back for a moment to names: the name we translate as “Jacob” is, in Hebrew, “ya‘āqōb” — the heel-grabber, the one who acts crookedly. Note the alliteration. As he prepares to ford the Jabbok, ya‘āqōb finds himself in an “ābaq,” a wrestling match. The play on words is intentional. The wrestler wrestles. But there’s more to ya‘āqōb. The root for the word “to wrestle,” from which Jacob is given his name, can also mean “to get dusty.”

Wrestling is a physical thing. It connects us to the ground, recalls the dirt that God promised Jacob as a birthright and the dirt of the ground on which he slept when he first fled Esau. But it also tells us something fundamental about our lives.

We who are made of dust live our lives in scrapes.
We fight and engage with the world,
and, like Amelia Bedelia, it leaves a dusty mark.
None of us are unscathed in our wrestling.
All of us are vulnerable,
connected in our lives,
to the dust that scatters in the wind.

But.
And this is important:
the story of creation is the story of a God who does God’s best work in the dirt,
and the story of Jacob at the Jabbok reminds us
that the one who made us from dust,
is not himself afraid of getting a bit dirty.

God covers us in our most transcendent moments. And God embraces us in the dark. Now lest this all seem too abstract I want you to know that I’ve seen God in your lives, at work in the most joyful days and at work in the cage match.

I’ve seen you wrestle.

I've had the privilege of coming alongside so many of you in the dust of life.
I've walked in rooms mid-way through a wrestling match
— where news of a diagnosis has brought despair,
where the hope couldn't buoy the treatment,
where a dying breath has taken the breath out of the room.

We have prayed together and struggled together.
And then, over the course of days and weeks and months and years,
by some grace-filled mystery,
I've seen so many of you come to understand that even in the worst of it,
God was present.
God was forming the dust of your lives
and creating something new
where before there was only an unending midnight fight.

Now I am not, mind you, suggesting that God *sends* darkness to teach us cosmic lessons about prayer and perseverance. I mean only to suggest that God abides with us in our wrestling, God embraces us in the depths and God, to paraphrase Paul, is wrestling all the chaotic strands of life, the beautiful ones and terrible ones, toward Kingdom good.

Like a parent who wraps their arms around their their flailing stronger-than-imaginable toddler, God engages us as we wrestle. God makes God's self vulnerable to our angst, joy, and despair. God works to bend the Jabboks and Gethsemanes of our lives toward the empty tomb, and that work occasionally leaves us with a limp.

I know y'all want me to wrap this up but I have to tell you one more thing. When the time comes for this particular match to end, God offers one final blessing.

God gives Jacob a new name. "You shall no longer be called Jacob," says the man, "but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

As a child I wrestled with my name. I worried what inheritance Amelia Bedlia had for me. Would some aloof well-meaning fool define the boundaries of my life? The names, the legacies and promises given to us at our birth are weighty things. I've wrestled with a thousand things since those roll calls. I've wondered if the sins of those after whom I've named would haunt me or if their virtues would lift me up. I've wrestled with God and with myself, I've wrestled with the names the world has called with me, and with my sense of call. I've been a fool like Amelia Bedilia (when Jen first told me she was allergic to bees, I asked if that meant she shouldn't eat honey). I've shared the sins of my ancestors and I've wrestled against them.

Names are powerful things.
And while God has wrestled with us through
the complexity of our lives,
God has also been forming us
beyond the boundaries of the identities we inherit.

Here's another way of saying that: we are more than what we are called. By the grace of baptism we are connected all the way back to Jacob at the Jabbok, but we are also connected to one another, to our neighbors, to our shared humanity, and to the God who works through us. Jacob's blessing was connected to Abraham's but it was an entirely new gift — and a profoundly communal one. Israel reminds us that we, none of us, are alone in our wrestling.

Jacob is given a new name. Israel. The odd thing is that Jacob, throughout the rest of Genesis, is still called Jacob. When God renames Jacob's grandfather — from Abram to Abraham — the authors of the text don't look back. But Jacob can't quite shake the name Isaac gave him.

It seems to me that God recognizes the marks wrestling has left on Jacob and allows him to keep the name that matches his limp. God knows that Jacob has been through it. And God honors the struggle — at the same time, God offers Jacob a new identity, one linked not to his fight, but to his perseverance *and* to his community. Jacob will never fully live up to Israel, but by the power of God he will be transformed by it.

By calling Jacob Israel, God reminds Jacob that his identity is not his alone, but the destiny of a people. By the grace of God, we have been called on to share that destiny. The promise given to us was first given to Jacob and Israel, and we share it with them on behalf of a wrestling-weary world.

We have each been given names, legacies and identities with which we struggle. But we are each of us called to still to a greater household. We are called by the God who shapes us, forms us, and embraces us in all of our wrestling. No grief, no anxiety, no doubt — no name, no identity, no history can separate you from that call and from God's all-embracing love. In it and in the community of faith you are not alone.

Life leaves its mark, but God abides. And if Jacob can tell us anything it's this: to be a Christian is not a swagger. It is a limp, a mark of engagement and a sign of promise. A community formed in the dust.

—Leigh Stuckey