**It’s In The Struggle That We Are Transformed**

**Genesis 32:22-31**

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 For the last two years I have been privileged and blessed to be a part of the two year Academy for Spiritual Formation through the Upper Room. This is the same organization and publishing house that creates the Upper Room Daily Devotional Guide usually found in the west entry.

 The Academy of Spiritual Formation is a time of retreat, fellowship, worship, lectures, a required reading list, covenant communities and silence. It is a time of renewal and a time of personal and spiritual examination where the questions of faith and spirituality are not always easily answered. But as our Team Leader, Pat Luna frequently reminds us “It is in the struggle that we are formed.”

 As a result of these conversations, lectures and readings I have become aware of and able to acknowledge and explore my own white privilege. The news cycles are filled with ongoing unrest and protests in the street following the deaths of too many persons of color at the hands of our police. My weeks have become filled with book reading and Zoom meetings looking inward to a lifetime of privilege that I am now embarrassed by. Looking at the lectionary readings my heart nearly leapt with “aha’ when I saw the story of Jacob “wrestling” with the angel as one of the selected readings for this week. For this seems to be a summer of struggle, wrestling with isolation, racism and privilege, limitations imposed by COVID, a polarization of our nation and the ongoing ordinary everyday life lived in community with other human beings.

 The scripture today is a story. It’s a familiar story of Jacob as he wrestles with an angel, a wrestling match that continues until the break of day. It’s not just familiar, but perhaps a great story of redemption and forgiveness. If Jesus had been telling this story as a parable, it might be called the Prodigal Brother. I am beginning to rank it up there with the stories of Moses and the burning bush, or Saul on the road to Damascus and Peter who denied knowing Christ Jesus. In each instance, these humans were changed. I do not believe it is the wrestling match alone that is the point of the story, but rather the experience of a man called Jacob transformed into Israel, the father of a nation.

 We need to understand who Jacob was as a younger man and put this scene into the larger context of Jacob’s life along with other people and events. Jacob’s legacy so far is not one of integrity or principle. He has been crafty, tricky, and an outright cheat. First he conned Esau out of his firstborn birthright for a bowl of stew when Esau was hungry. Then Jacob disguises himself to receive Isaac’s blessing that was also meant for Esau. Esau is so angry he threatens to kill Jacob. With guidance from both parents, Jacob flees to the land of his Uncle Laban for safety and to seek an acceptable wife.

 Remember that Jacob had to work a total of fourteen years for Laban in order to get the wife he thought he bargained for with his first seven years of labor. This might cause you to think “Poor Jacob”, but later on Jacob does some fancy sorting of the speckled and striped goats, enticing more fertile sheep to his fields and thereby ending up with stronger and better flocks and becoming a very rich man. As you can imagine, he and Laban part on less than friendly terms. However, it is time to return to Canaan. It’s been twenty years. But Esau, who once threatened to kill Jacob, is there. Jacob is rightfully scared. He has heard that Esau is coming with 400 men. This does not seem a friendly reunion.

 In my surfing through the internet I came across this image, a painting by Eugene Delacroix that resonated within me. The intensity of the struggle is captured by the straining of Jacob’s muscles set against the serenity of the surrounding landscape. It brought a reality to what had previously been “just a story.”

 What we know from Genesis is that Jacob wrestles all night long with a man or an angel or God depending on the translation or interpretation you read. Jacob indeed claims to have been face-to-face with God and is still alive. Although I cannot believe a mere human prevailed against God, I also know that there have been many times when I have met God in the face of a friend or stranger through their acts of kindness or hospitality.

 Regardless of the foe’s identity, Jacob is wounded and left with a permanent limp. Yet he lives and walks away with a blessing and a new name – Israel. Was Jacob arrogant to think that he had actually tangled with God, prevailed, and lived to tell it? Was Jacob greedy in asking for another blessing? Or might Jacob truly have been wrestling with his own choices, actions and wrongdoing?

 Any and all are possible for God has been using very flawed humans to further his kingdom since the beginning of time. It is only because of God’s love and grace that we are forgiven and blessed.

 So is that it? Jacob/ (Israel) gets his blessing and goes on his merry way?

In the morning the servants and their children lead a procession; followed by Leah and her children, then finally Rachel and son Joseph. **But this time** Jacob steps to the front and greets his brother directly. Without benefit of a disguise, Jacob bows down to Esau seven times and refers to himself as “your servant.” Jacob finally demonstrates a willingness to make amends and a spirit of humility.

 An encounter with or our relationship with God always has the power to transform us.

God formed a nation with this trickster Jacob now Israel. God took a shy Moses and used him to negotiate with Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites. God blinded Saul, a persecutor of Christians, and used him as the Apostle Paul to carry the message to the Gentiles. God forgave Peter who denied even knowing Jesus, and yet built a church upon him. What do you think God is capable of in your life and mine?

 In a word - anything! When we come before God, with all our warts, fears, sorrows, and indiscretions it does not matter if we truly desire to live as a child of God. We are assured of God’s love and forgiveness. For God’s grace is freely given and GRACE is that by which we are transformed. Never to be the same and becoming a servant of God.

 This reading of Jacob and the angel immediately brought to mind a favorite hymn, (one of many) Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown. Charles Wesley originally published “Wrestling Jacob” as a poem of fourteen stanzas (six lines each). We sing only four verses in our hymnal but turn the page and you will find the remaining ones. Listen to these words of Charles Wesley that we do not sing but I think we could and probably should:

My **prayer hath power** with God;

the **grace unspeakable** I now receive;

**through faith** I see thee face to face,

I see thee face to face, **and live!**

In vain I have not wept and strove--

thy nature, and thy name is Love.

 From Wrestling Jacob –Charles Wesley

 The hymn and poem deliver words of comfort that we are not alone. We are reminded that we are **loved** by a God who is faithful and steadfast. We are reminded that there is power in our prayer because God listens. We are reminded that despite our wrongdoing and misplaced priorities, we, too, like Jacob can be transformed into God’s servants. The only question remaining is are we willing?

 It is in the struggle that we are transformed. By God’s grace and God’s love. Amen.