

All Tangled Up

These last few months have felt like the longest wrestling match ever. Surely dawn is about to break? Surely this long night is about to end? Like Jacob, we are weary and bewildered, still let's hold on, don't let go.

Poet and pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes wrote this poem inspired by verse 24, which reads:

*Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*
—Genesis 32.24

We trust a dark God
who seizes us in lonely places,
who comes to us in travail,
who births us only in great labor.
Faith is no mere greeting card but a wrestling,
an awful confronting of both doubt and assumption,
a tangling with what is in which neither can prevail.
The Mysterious One uses barred holds,
offers invisible becomings.
There is no struggle in which
blessing is not enfolded in the mystery.
There is no tribulation in which
God is not reworking the clay.
Limping, we become a new person with a new name.

Therefore the prayer of the faithful
is not that things go well,
but always and only this:
"I will not let you go unless you bless me."

How did Jacob come to find himself in this wrestling match? A lot has led up to this moment. All his life he has believed to get what he wanted he had to lie and deceive. All his life he thought if he just had something more, got what he thought he deserved, then he would be set, he'd be happy a success, no matter who he had to trick or manipulate or hurt to get it, if he got what he wanted, it would be worth it.

Instead this led to Jacob leading a life of estrangement, on the run from those he has devastated and betrayed. He's been living in fear of his brother, Esau's wrath for 20 years. The last time they were together Esau was so angry he wanted to kill Jacob. Kill him for the way he tricked their father, Isaac. Kill him for stealing everything that rightfully belonged to Esau. Jacob knows he is going to be traveling in lands where he may encounter his brother. In hopes of quelling whatever thoughts of anger and revenge Esau may still have 20 years later, Jacob sends a messenger to tell Esau he is willing to share from his wealth of cattle, donkeys and flocks and Jacob hopes that his brother will be kind. The messenger returns saying, "We gave the message to Esau, and he's coming now with 400 men." Jacob is terrified, he feels trapped, he frantically divides his large holdings of animals and people into two camps.

And this is where our scripture begins, Jacob is worried for his life and for the lives of his wives, and children, of losing all that he has spent his life tricking others to get. Now night has fallen, now in the dark he helps his two wives, two of the servants still with them, his 11 sons and all the rest of his belongings across the Jabbok River, but Jacob goes back across the Jabbok, he stays apart by himself, separated from everything he believes defines who he is, he is all alone.

And then on this dark lonely night, that he thought was already as bad as it could get, a man jumps out of the darkness, grabs Jacob and wrestles him to the ground. At some point, Jacob realizes he is not fighting with a thief who wants to overtake him, instead he understands, he is locked in an embrace with the one who creates, the one who sustains, the one who redeems,. And Jacob knows with all his heart and mind and strength that something miraculous is happening and he is not going to let go.

They fight and wrestle until that transcendent moment when this longest night is finally giving way to the new day. The mysterious man says, “let me go because dawn is breaking” but Jacob refuses to let go, so the man grabs Jacob’s thigh and tears a muscle as they continue to wrestle. The man says again, “Let me go.” And Jacob says, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.”

He asks Jacob his name—during this time, names were extremely important and descriptive. Your name told you and it told others who you were. This is a loose translation, but Jacob’s name meant, “I’m a jerk.”

The things others call us, the names we call ourselves take a terrible toll. If you are told all the time that you are a jerk, you start to act like a jerk.

The man hears Jacob say this and he says, “Your name won’t be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won.” Jacob receives his blessing; freed to live now not as one who needs to trick and deceive to get others to do as he wishes, with this blessing

he is free to live as himself, to be true and honest and knowing he is strong enough to engage life face to face, that he has the courage to face the consequences of his actions. He doesn’t have to run and hide, or blame and shame others. And, if he should forget, he has this limp to remind him.

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These last few months we’ve found ourselves with so much to wrestle with and to confront. In this season of shock and disbelief, of rage and overwhelm, of worry and fear, of not knowing and of change, so much change. Will we get to the point where we know we are embraced by the one who creates, who sustains, who redeems? Will we have Jacob’s tenacity to hold on until we are blessed? Will we share Jacob’s courage to go limping into this new life that is before us, bearing the pain of being human and celebrating the joy of God’s abundant love? Will we have the strength to hold on until the dawn breaks?

I cannot help but think of Representative John Lewis had a moment when God asked, “What is your name?” and after listening God replied, “That is not your name now. Your name is Israel. Because you struggled with God and with men and won.” and representative Lewis took that blessing and

shares his own blessing with us, saying, “Though I am gone, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.”

That God asked the women who led the suffrage movement, that God asked these black and white women, “What is your name?” and after listening God replied, “That is not your name now. Your name is Israel. Because you struggled with God and with men and won.”

That God is asking all of us; teachers, parents, students, health care workers, leaders who are feeling overwhelmed and unsure, “What is your name?” and God replies again, “Your name is Israel.” You are God’s people.

That God is asking those who are living with the threat and reality of terrible illness and those who love and care for them, “What is your name?” “Your name is Israel!” You are God’s beloved.

Crying out to God in the midst of suffering, especially suffering of oppression and injustice is healing. God’s steadfast love is with us in this dark night and we have the strength to hold on until the dawn breaks, limping away a new person with a new name: Our name is Israel. God’s chosen people.

Jacob, now Israel, limps away from Peniel to face his greatest fear, something he’s never done before. He stands before his brother, ready to be struck down for all the harm he has caused, instead Esau embraces him in reconciliation and joy. While we continue to wrestle through this long dark night, when there is so much that is not how we want it to be, don’t let go! Day break is coming, receive God’s blessing:

What is your name? That is not your name now. Your name is Israel. Because you struggled with God and with men and won. You are a new person with a new name; God’s chosen and beloved. Live to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.

Amen.