

Holy Limpers

Genesis 32: 22-31

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. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

This story is probably one of my favorites in all of scripture. So imagine the scene: it is reckoning day for Jacob. His devious past has finally caught up with him. It has been twenty years since he stole his brother Esau's blessing. Twenty years of running from the problem. Now Esau, with his four-hundred person army, has finally found Jacob. So Jacob, with a gurgle in his gut, sends his family and everything he has acquired over twenty years across the river ahead of him. He even tries to butter up Esau by sending him a tithe from his prosperity pile. Then he builds a campfire and sits on the bank of the Jabbok River...waiting... waiting. Then, out of the shadows, a strange figure blindsides him, like a linebacker coming out of nowhere. They roll around on the ground, wrestling in the mud. Except, when the moon shines a light on the stranger's face, Jacob sees that the one who is ambushing him isn't his brother, Esau...it's God.

Sit with the thought for a moment: the antagonist in the story is God. God rolls up the sleeves, digs toes in the mud and provokes Jacob into a wrestling match. Now the Hebrew word for wrestling here is *yvek*—it literally means to "get dirty." There is some fancy Jewish wordplay happening here which has led some to insinuate that the point of God antagonizing Jacob is to bring him back to the dirt from which he was created—to return Jacob to himself.

This last week we said goodbye to Congressman John Lewis, one of our country's antagonists. He was no stranger to mug shots or a ride to prison in the back of a squad car for his acts of non-violent civil disobedience. His legacy was one of making "good trouble" for the sake of justice. Perhaps God is about making good trouble as well. God is the antagonist in the story willing to get dirty because things cannot continue as they are, and if Jacob is going to be the beginning of a new people, he must be willing to get dirty with God, and in the process be returned to himself.

So step back and watch the wrestling match unfold. Jacob and the personified deity scrambling on the ground. Just when the divine stranger has Jacob pinned, Jacob flips the stranger over. Back and forth they go, arms locked, engaged, working each other into pretzel holds. Then as day breaks, for whatever reason the stranger taps out. But Jacob being the opportunist he is, clings tighter to God's heel until God provides the blessing Jacob has longed for his entire life.

But keep your eyes on what happens next. God asks Jacob a question: "Who are you?" It's a question of identity. It mirrors the question he was asked twenty years ago when he stole Esau's blessing. Remember their father asked young Jacob the same question: "Who are you?" And what did Jacob say? "I am Esau." Now Jacob is angling for a blessing once again, but this time God is asking the question: "Who are you?" And now, out of breath and caked with mud, what does Jacob say? "I am Jacob! The trickster. The con-artist. The heel-grabber." And in that moment, when Jacob owns who he is, it is then God says, "Ah, now this...THIS...is something I can work with."

You see, once Jacob owns who he is, he is blessed with a new identity. No longer is he the one who clings to the heels of others to get ahead, but he is now Israel—the one who clings to God. But there is also a cost to this blessing. Like a mother whose body is marked after childbirth, a limp will forever mark who Israel is—the new identity and the new limp go together and cannot be separated. Blessing and brokenness are two sides of the same coin. Because the blessing doesn't lead us away from our brokenness. Instead, blessing leads us into it.

There is a story about Saint Francis who was known for only owning one single outfit. So when you hear about how St. Francis ran around nature in the nude, it was probably during laundry day! As you can imagine, over time the fabric of his one outfit would get worn out and he would tear it. But rather than getting a new outfit, he would simply patch up the old one up. Over time, he had more patches than he had fabric. His reason? He wanted people to see that the way he looked on the outside matched the way he truly was on the inside. He was declaring the gospel at all times not through a romanticized, exceptionalistic version of himself, but through the joy of God's grace in his brokenness. I mean, think about it: if there was nothing about our lives that needed to be patched up, what would be the point of God's grace?

If we're honest, we are all holy limpers. All of us are limping through the joys and sorrows of life. Limping through the era of COVID-19. Limping down the streets protesting racism. Limping through restless worry-filled nights. Limping through the stress of the upcoming school year. Limping through not being able to gather physically as a church. Limping through these days of profound loss and uncertainty.

But I think the world could use some holy limpers right about now. People who aren't afraid of wrestling; people who aren't afraid of owning their stuff; people who see blessing and brokenness belonging in the same category, and who use God's grace as their walking stick.

Perhaps this is the deepest mystery of our faith. So, there's one more image I'd like to you to consider. Imagine: it's Easter morning. Just before the sun plays peek-a-boo over the horizon, we see Jesus stumbling out of the tomb. And as we watch him walk around the garden, we notice he is limping. Then he limps over to us and says, "Go, share the news with others."

So holy limpers of Trinity, keep making good trouble. Keep wrestling. Keep clinging to God. And whatever you do, keep being honest about our blessings and brokenness as a people, as a church, as a nation, as a world. Because, if the gospel is true, then *that is the moment when we hear God saying*, "Ah, now this...THIS...is something I can work with."