Jacob and the Dark Night

# Foreground

**Just a note to bring people up to the story of Jacob:** Abraham and Sarah had a son Isaac. Isaac had two paternal twin boys named Esau and Jacob. Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright, and his blessing: And then Jacob fled away from Canaan Land to the east. There he lived with his mother’s people until he became the prosperous, rather harried husband of two wives and their handmaids, and father of many children. Quarrelling with his father in law, he departed in secret from the east, and made his way back to his home in Canaan. Esau, who would probably still have a grudge against his thief of a brother, is coming to meet him with ‘four hundred men’ which is like four armored divisions today. There are burned bridges still smoking behind him, and no hope of going back. There is an angry, hairy, rough and ready brother before him, threatening everything he owns, everything he loves. Jacob has made his way by a strange combination of holiness – an odd sense of God’s presence in his life; and by tricking people – his father, his brother, his father in law, just about everyone! But there are no tricks to be played here. God has appeared to Jacob over the years, most famously in the vision of Jacob’s ladder, but God has not intervened in Jacob’s career – except by rewarding Jacob’s schemes. No schemes to reward here. Nothing but Jacob in the dark. Alone.

# text

**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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.**

Maybe Jacob sent everyone ahead, just so he COULD wrestle with God. Maybe he thought this was the last chance God had to speak to him in the wilderness. That’s possible. He’s here, at the end of his journey, about to cross over into Canaan, his homeland. Tomorrow will bring either doom or deliverance. But if God’s going to show up, it’s going to be tonight. It’s GOT to be tonight. So the ‘man’ showed up, and they wrestle.

**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. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’**

This story is so old, so primitive, there are no explanations, no theology or dogma that covers the area of strange divine beings that can only wrestle with people in the dark. So don’t ask why, because there is no authorized answer. ‘The man really wants breakfast’ is as good an answer as any.

**But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’**

Jacob needs something from this encounter. No matter if he’s still alive in the morning, there is still Esau and his 400 riding down on him. He NEEDS this encounter to bear some fruit, some blessing. It’s NOT enough to survive – no vision of angels and ladders is going to do the trick. He needs an answer, not a mystery.

**So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ 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.’**

And that’s true, Jacob’s story is all about striving. We can honor that. Most of us here respect hard work, thinking clearly, setting goals and achieving them. But when it comes to ‘striving with God,’ well, that’s something else, isn’t it? In fact, I’d say Lutherans especially can be rather poor Jacobs in this case. Let’s face it, when we pray are we more comfortable saying, “God, I need this, or I want this.” Or are we happy just saying, “Lord, your will be done, not mine.” Have you ever prayed like that? Right? I mean, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, you better believe HE wrestled with God that night, and even then he came away saying, “Not my will but thine be done.”

But is that what Jesus wants from us? The bible tells us to pray without ceasing, with prayer and supplication let your desires be made known to God. What we WANT. What we NEED! The bible encourages us time and again to struggle, to wrestle, to ASK, and SEEK, and KNOCK! “Oh, woman, great is your faith! May it be done unto you as you desire!” “Greater faith than this man I have not seen in all Israel,” Jesus said, “Let be done for you as you have asked!”

As my son was growing up, every once in a while he pushed his old man. Every so often! And more often than not, in the aftermath, I welcomed that push! I wanted him to grow, to think, to act for himself! My daughter, well, that’s another story. Abby would make a great Jacob, is all I’m saying. But you want that as a parent, you want someone determined, who tests their will, their freedom, their own personality! You want to see it flourish, to grow, to prosper. Jesus called God our Father. Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father.” Our heavenly Father WANTS us to grow, to flourish, to prosper! God wants us to push every so often!

And here’s how it turns out: Jacob is still called Jacob mostly through the rest of the bible, but his descendants are almost always called ‘Children of Israel.’ Even to this day! Jacob the trixter was an ancestor, sure, but Israel, who strives with God, is the Patriarch! Israel is the one who matters!

**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.**

So maybe giving Jacob a new name wasn’t the blessing – the text doesn’t say. It does say what happens thereafter, and from the story it’s clear that somehow, Esau’s heart is changed, they meet like long lost friends, and Jacob’s family and fortune is preserved. It’s a blessing!

**So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’**

No matter the nature of this stranger, no matter angel or devil, human or divine, Jacob says he saw God face to face. So it’s needless for us to speculate, just as the story teller seems to intend. It doesn’t matter who or what the ‘man’ was, what matters is that Jacob wrestled, and Jacob overcame, and saw in the encounter God’s face.

Who is the pope? Well, to a whole lot of people, apparently, when they see the pope, they see God’s face. That’s how they react when they come away from the guy. It’s weird, but there it is. The pope is the vicar of Christ. But then, every Christian is a vicar of Christ as well, even the pope would affirm that. So in many ways, in some cases, we are NOT Jacob wrestling in the dark with an angel, we are the stranger coming to confront someone who needs to meet God. We are the man. We can give the blessing. We have that power. Not always, not every time, but more often than we suppose. Because God works through God’s people. Almost always. Direct, miraculous intervention is always an option, but God seems to prefer human agency. You, me, sinful as we are, inept as we are, human as we are – vicars of Christ. Vessels of mercy. Agents of grace. Give the blessing. Be the blessing! Share the blessing – you never know when someone else is wrestling in the Darkest of Nights – you don’t know! Maybe this ‘man’ was just some poor slob out for a walk because he couldn’t sleep! Maybe he was praying for God to use him somehow, to give him purpose and hope. Hopefully God won’t send you to wrestle with a strange man in the desert in the middle of the night… but who knows?

**The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.**

He’s limping, he’s hurt, but he’s blessed. Jacob is no more certain of the future than he was the night before, but he waited there for God. He wrestled with God, for all he knew. He received the blessing, and is ready for what’s next.

# Conclusion

Don’t waste a good Night of the Soul. Don’t squander it in fear and trembling. We don’t know if Jacob was courageous or worried to death. All we know is that he didn’t waste the encounter. And in the end, even he was amazed! I saw God face to face, and I’m still breathing! How about that! Think of the confidence he has now! Esau? Four hundred men? Pshaw! That’s nothing compared to the nightmare I faced last night, let me tell you!

Don’t waste it! The dark night comes to all of us, when we’re desperate, when we don’t know, when uncertainty overwhelms us. It comes to all of us. God will not spare us such experiences. “Deliver us from Evil,” sure, but deliver us from the Dark Night? Maybe that’s the only place God can actually reach some of us. Maybe that’s God’s only chance to speak to you! To bless you! To give you courage and strength. Don’t waste that Dark night. I wouldn’t wish such an experience upon anyone, but I want you all to grow in grace, too. I want you to mature, to be stronger, wiser, and more confident in Christ’s power and mercy. I want that for everyone here! So when it comes, as come it must, be afraid, sure. Be uncertain, wary, and fearful. It’s the dark night. But don’t waste it. Don’t miss it. Meet God face to face. And wrestle until you receive that blessing. It won’t just change your world. It will change OUR world. For the better.