

Wrestling Match Timothy L. Carson
Genesis August 6, 2017

He was no paragon of virtue, that's for sure. We've watched his life unfolding and it hasn't been pretty. He cheated his brother more than once, so much so that he had to get out of town to save his own skin. "Scoundrel" is a pretty good descriptor for Jacob.

As it goes for a man on the run, his life threatened and conscience troubled, he ends up with pretty good fortune. Just recently we heard the story of Jacob's dream in the wilderness, head on a rock pillow with a ladder stretching between heaven and earth. The golden dream was entirely unearned and unrelated to virtue of any kind. Quite to the contrary. And yet there he lay, perched on sacred ground, whether he deserved it or not.

This brings us to another critical moment in our story. After his dream, Jacob is still running for his life. Don't let anyone fool you; you can have a mountain top experience and the same problems will be waiting for you when you come down.

No matter the ecstasy, the divine union, the overwhelming sense of awe and mystery and unity with the cosmos and God, your problems are going to be there waiting. The question is this: What are you going to bring off the mountain to meet them?

His brother Esau is still pursuing him, catching up from behind, closing the gap and closing in for the kill. Jacob pulls together all his shrewdness and in an attempt to soften the blow (and maybe buy time) he sends ambassadors back to intercept his brother. They come bearing gifts, an excessive array of animals, gifts meant to soften up the rage of his brother who is hell bent on revenge.

Well, while that little mediation is going on Jacob and his entourage have continued to make their escape. They have reached the river Jabbok, which should be a clue for us. The Bible is full of water crossings and big things happen when the characters cross over, plunge under or stand beside the waters of transformation.

In maybe one of Jacob's first courageous acts he sends his family on over across the river to safety and he stays to face his reckoning. Like so many refugees fleeing war, violence and danger, the family makes difficult decisions for survival. Those often include splitting up on the way to safety with the hope that they will be reunited later.

As night falls Jacob finds himself between the danger of his brother and the unknown future on the other side of the river. There, in-between this and that, alone, shrouded by night, he is about to have a face-off with more than earthly harm. What he is about to encounter is the much more challenging battle of the soul.

All we know is that there, alone, in the pitch black of night, Jacob wrestled with someone, something, all the way until morning. Many have jumped forward quickly at this point to name the encounter: "Well, this was an angel. This was God." And we can understand why they might say that. Who else? Jacob is having a face off with the holy.

But the text is more mysterious and ambiguous than that, like our own encounters are usually more ambiguous and mysterious.

Haven't you ever had those times in your life, even now, when you wrestle all night, in wakefulness or dreams, with powers you can hardly describe? You are in combat with a force, a man, a presence, and it requires all of you. You contend with conflicts, with oppositions, a painful past or looming present. You wrestle, you struggle until you are exhausted, there is nothing left. All you have is hope, if you have that.

As morning approaches, the two are engaged in what seems to Jacob to be a draw. But in a touch as light as a feather the dark presence puts out his hip joint so that Jacob is helpless. If you have ever wondered who will prevail in a contest between us mortals and the mysterious power of the universe, wonder no longer. It's a mismatch; we just think the odds are even. And as Frederick Buechner reminds us, wouldn't it be the most terrible thing if we won? (*The Magnificent Defeat*).

The contest may be over but Jacob will not let go. He is like a beaten man holding on to his opponent on the ropes. And of all things he cries out with a demand that we may or may not understand, namely, that he will not let go unless the shadowy man will bless him. Here in the thick of sacred battle he asks for blessing from his opponent. If you have slain me in battle then at least bless me, whoever you are, because there is a sacred bond between adversaries. There is now a sacred bond between vanquished and victor and Jacob may live with this, live with himself, live with the cards that have been dealt if only he can know.

To his question Jacob only receives another question, as to who *he* is. It's Jacob, of course, but that's not the point. His opponent has asked his name because it's time to *change* names. Now, he says, Jacob will become Israel (because he struggled). In the dark of night, in the middle of the struggle of the soul, a new name, a new identity is conferred. A transformation must be marked by a naming. He has become something new in this passage.

The cheat, the exploiter, the coward, has seen holy things and wrestled holy battles. He is no longer who he was. He is now the product of that struggle, wounded but new.

You might think that turnabout is fair play, that Jacob's naming deserves an equal disclosure from his shadowy opponent. Jacob-now-Israel, once more asks for his opponent's name, but a name he does not receive. What he receives instead is a blessing. He *never* hears the name.

The last time we see Jacob-now-Israel he is limping across the Jabbok River in the pre-dawn light. On the morning following the great struggle he crosses with a new name and a blessing from a mysterious presence whose name he never heard.

If you have found yourself in that nether-nether world between worlds, that place where the soul struggles between the light and the darkness, between past and present, between your highest self and lowest one, you will know this story.

You will know that no matter how hard you fight the great mystery prevails in the end. You will know that it is life-changing and you can't ever go back, not even in your dreams. You will know that you find a new name, a new identity. You will know yourself blessed as a result of the struggle itself. But, like Jacob, what you never know, not entirely, is the presence that made it so. You walk away without name.

It's not that you don't guess or have an inkling; you do. You can call it the spirit or Jesus or God or what the Chronicles of Narnia names "an august presence." But you will not have a name to limit or control or peg this presence. It is beyond naming and there is no name for it. Some things are beyond naming, especially our naming of them. They defy naming because that would make it all too ordinary. You and I will be healed and blessed as the product of our wounding, and at the time we won't know exactly how or by Whom.

Albert Einstein confirmed one of his great theories about the bending of light and slowing of time as he measured the positional change of starlight around the huge gravitational field of the sun.

The only way he could see and measure the light from a star so near the visual edge of the sun was if it was dark. So how can you have enough darkness near the overwhelming glare of the sun? He did so with the assistance of the great Astronomer Arthur Eddington during the last great total solar eclipse on May 28, 1919. And those tests confirmed those aspects of Einstein's theory of general relativity.

You see, Jacob receives a new name and a blessing against the backdrop of the darkness and unknown. Sometimes you need an eclipse to understand the light.

I am not a follower of the prolific author of fictional novels, Danielle Steel, and in fact have never read one of her books, until now that is.

Actually what I have discovered is not one of her novels but rather a particular autobiography. It's called *A Gift of Hope* (Bantom, 2013). Let me explain.

Steel is the single mother of eight children, but she used to have nine. She lost a son after his long agonizing struggle with mental illness. He took his own life. And at the same time she lost a marriage, which often happens in the aftermath of such a loss.

Her life was plunged into deep darkness and struggle, the kind of grief that does not let you go. She tried to function for the children. As a practicing Catholic she not only attended mass but stopped for prayer every day in her church. She poured out her heart time and again to the great Silence, waiting, agonizing.

Then one dark winter evening she was there, on her knees, surrounded by candles, face in her hands, begging God for something, anything.

Within minutes it came very directly and simply: *Help the Homeless*. That was it. No please, no explanation and no signature.

You would think that after all that struggle and waiting she would have experienced enormous relief, but no. All she could think was "Oh no!! Not that!! Please!!" She stayed kneeling, lit some more candles, and tried to pretend she hadn't really just heard those words. How about some other project? Working with children maybe?

She continued to negotiate: "Come on, God, not that. How about something else." No deal. The message kept coming like a subliminal ad: *Help the homeless. Too bad if you don't like it. You asked and I told you. Now go do it*. She was not thrilled.

The end of the story is that this reluctant servant did just that and enlisted others to help her. For eleven years a team of eleven people went out into the streets and delivered clothing, coats, sleeping bags, gloves and other essentials in three vans.

She was wounded. She contended with her mysterious adversary. Her new name and blessing came through an eclipse created by the death of her son. And she re-found both him and herself by following the Voice to where that Mysterious Presence would lead.

If you think that the prerequisite for sacred epiphanies is a life perfectly in place, righteous in all ways, your head together and living in harmony with God, think again. God specializes in messiness, unrealized potential and the conflicted soul. If we are willing to stop in the twilight and wait, if we are willing to contend with a Power we cannot name or fully know or control, if we are willing to ask but receive an answer we did not expect or even want, then we are in great company.

I wonder how Jacob was going to explain what happened to him to his family, or his brother, or for that matter anyone else. How do you describe the indescribable, except by way of the impact it had on you, how it changed you? How do you live into a new name, become the blessing that came at you

sideways? And as we limp away from the scene of the battle, how do we say thank you for the ambush of the Spirit, however it went?

And that's the good news from Columbia, Missouri.