

*Wrestling That's For Real*

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(Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7,15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21)

Rev. Ian K. Johnston

St. John's Presbyterian

Cornwall, ON

One day at Sunday School one of the children was drawing a picture. *What are you drawing?* asked the teacher. *God*, said the child. But no one knows what God is like, countered the teacher. *They will when they see my picture!* We have a few pictures of God today. The usual ones come from the Psalmist: *As for me, I shall be hold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness* (Psalm 17:15). It is a righteous God as seen by righteous people.

Then there is the one Jacob drew at the river Jabbok. Remember the story behind the story. Jacob stole his brother's birthright and fled. In a far country he lived by his wits rather than his morals. He ripped off friends and family alike. He treated everyone equally. Now, he was coming home. Home was where the heart was, but, in this case, home was where the hurts were also. Across the river was the Promised Land. Jacob's land. In between was the Jabbok, and in between might be a righteous God. *And a man wrestled with him until daybreak.* Let's not pretend this was wrestling with a conscience or struggling with doubt. It was not two out of three falls for Jacob's character; it was surviving to see the morning.

That and *the promise*, Jacob won the battle at the Jabbok not because he was the stronger but because the dawn scattered the Jabbok. The word means, *wrestling* – and illumined, *Peniel*. That word means, *the face of God*.

Maybe meeting one's match also can mean meeting one's God. The truth about Jabbok is Peniel. God gives us the victory. We do not win a blessing from God – we only receive it. And the most mysterious secret of all, we understand only AFTER that Jabbok of the night and Peniel of the day were the very same place all along.

Why does God plant the seeds of blessing in the soil of human struggle? Who knows? Maybe the comfort of the idea is that God can, and God does. Is anything truly wonderful born without struggle or pain? Are a child and the promise so different? Labour and struggle are what make new life. Can light dawn except in the darkness? Maybe God's face is like a Rembrandt painting – only seen in power and majesty in the setting of deep shades and dark shadows.

Then again, the mystery should not surprise us. For we too have also striven with God – and prevailed. On another day the shadows witnessed the struggle of God

and humanity. The sky turned black as night and the face of God was lost in the darkness in the sixth hour. Golgotha was the name of that Jabbok. It announced that mere men and women had striven with God and had prevailed. But the Easter's dawning proclaimed it to be a victory of Grace. If through Jacob God meant to make Abraham's descendants as the stars of the sky and the sands to sea, through Jacob, all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. That is, if Jacob lived to see the dawn.

What is Jabbok? It is where we can lose it. It's the attack we did not expect and the struggle to keep something precious – something like life, a marriage, a future. It is fighting for it because there is no other choice.

Jabbok is also someone clinging to it all and refusing to let go. Jacob says: *I will not let you go, unless you bless me!* Strange, that out of darkness we ask for a blessing! Maybe this story lets us say we have our own Jabboks. Maybe it says that, as God's people, we will.

At dawn, the first light reveals a crippled man and a trapped victor. Who was the adversary? It was someone who blessed and who could not leave a name – and a victor who gave away the victory.

Blessing is the outcome of battle, and a strange blessing it is. You shall no longer be called Jacob – the supplanted – but, "*Israel*", for you have striven with God, and with humans, and have prevailed.

Israel is easy: the name of the blessing and the promise. But striven with God! How do you win a contest with the Most High? There is only one way and this is what makes this strange tale good news. Here is the clue. The one who is the victor and the one who brings home the victory are not the same. The magnificent defeat of God meant victory for the undeserving – for every last Jacob in us. Thanks be to God that we who call ourselves Christians can come to Him by way of what is truly an Easter faith. The struggle that blesses those whom God has chosen. Amen.