

The story of Jacob at Peniel is a pivotal point in this patriarch’s saga. He has run away from home some 20 years earlier; he has married two women and has children and many herds of animals; and now he is going home with fear and trembling. Going home means he must face Esau, his brother, and he’s heard tell that Esau is on his way with 400 men, 400 being the standard number of a regiment or raiding party.

Jacob quickly comes up with a strategy: he divides his wives and children placing those he loves the least on the front line and spacing Rachel and her children in back so that perhaps she may escape if they are met with violence. The family crosses the ford of the Jabbok and camps for the night while Jacob is left alone.

This night epitomizes all of Jacob’s life, a life of constant struggling, grasping, and wrestling with God and humankind. This night terror comes right before he will come face to face with Esau who has been his nemesis since together they grew in Rebekah’s womb. It’s all about to come down on him, and who knows how it will end! To this point Jacob has stolen his father’s blessing, been given the vision of divine blessing, been blessed with wives, children, and wealth that would have said to the world that he is a very blessed man, and still his soul this night is filled with angst, and he exerts all his strength to demand that he again be blessed. This very ancient text is rich and complicated. Its power lies in the many and varied lessons each of us may glean from it. Certainly, it is the message of a “still-speaking God.”

Jacob’s adversary with whom he wrestles is named as man, God, and spiritual representative. Even the most studied Hebrew scholars cannot or do not feel the need to completely understand this adversary’s identity, because for Jacob the One with whom he struggles, the One with whom he comes face to face, is the Divine in whatever form God chooses to reveal the God-essence in the dark of night.

This is Jacob’s dark night of the soul. All he has done comes back to haunt him, and his crookedness (which his name, Jacob, implies) indicts him; he is not worthy of the blessing, neither legally or morally, and he knows it. Will tomorrow’s meeting with Esau bring the judgment he so deserves? Could it be that Jacob’s night terror is his coming face to face with his own shadow side, that part of the human psyche that we suppress because we cannot accept that it is part of who we are?

Yet, face to face with God we can not hide; we know ourselves as we are fully known. This requires humility and courage. Once we see our shadow side we may find we must make choices we’d rather not make; we may wrestle with the claim God makes on us just as God’s claim was made on Jacob. It is in this relationship of wrestling with God that we are given an opportunity to find ourselves and the grace to accept ourselves. It’s hard work. Like Jacob it may even leave us partly crippled. Yet, God’s grace is sufficient and God’s grace was sufficient for Jacob. Jacob demands to know the name of the One he battles; in ancient times, to know the name of ones adversary, gave one power to defend oneself. Jacob never learns his adversary’s name.

But he’s given a new name himself; Jacob becomes Israel, and although in the Hebrew Bible both names are used going forward from this text, this is when Israel as, “one who struggled with God and prevailed,” is first used. When one reflects on this name, it seems that forever after Israel as a people have struggled with God and humanity and prevailed.

This story invites us to imagine our struggles as an opportunity of self-definition and identity. It is through this intense process that we more fully discern what our lives are meant to be about. So where ever this sacred struggle takes place it is on holy ground.

As Peniel becomes a place of worship, the holy ground of the divine and human encounter is sacred as well. Jacob experienced a lot that night: anxiety, fear, survival instincts, relief, self-realization, power and physical pain. The struggle left him a different man, able to face Esau, though with a limp. The Hebrew word translated “struck” when Jacob’s hip becomes out of joint should actually be translated as “lightly touched.” It’s not that the blow is so harsh; Jacob is touched; it’s almost like he’s given this limp as a divine reminder of the struggle, bringing with it humility.

If you’ve seen Stan’s face with its stitches, you’ve see a man who wrestled with terrors of the night. A week ago Friday night, Stan experienced one of the symptoms of his Parkinson’s disease. Something in the brain induces a dream that an adversary is in the room and unlike most of our bad dreams during which we stay asleep or wake ourselves, with Parkinson’s, the physical response to the dream is not held at bay. Our dear father has a good sense of humor about this as he recalls leaping out of bed (still asleep) to fight the adversary and consequently falling and cutting a 2½-inch gash on his head. Those of us who know Stan know the irony of this. because he’s such a peace-loving man that if he were confronted with an intruder, he’d be more likely to invite them to tea rather than lunge forth and attack. But these night terrors are quite different; they compel him to act.

In a crisis we human beings are compelled to at least confront our adversary even if the adversary is our own shadows, our wounds, our pride, our fears. In Jacob’s crisis, with God’s insistence and help, Jacob finds out what he’s made of. Jacob is a man struggling to survive, but he is also called blessed, and God will not let him forget it.

Often we move through our lives with little self-examination, especially if things are going OK. Yet, there are times when we are face to face with how our lives are intertwined with God’s dream for us and for all creation. This face to face meeting is holy ground where something new is born. I’ve mentioned this struggle as individual spiritual discernment, but it may also be the discernment of a church struggling to see more clearly the direction God has for us.

Perhaps this struggle may be more than personal or a church community; it may encompass a city, or even a country. My anxiety for our country has been very high the last week as we hear the struggling going on about the debt ceiling. It feels like we are struggling to decide who we are as a country and what kind of nation we want to become. I try to calm myself by thinking that maybe we need this struggle; and that ultimately good will come from it. I pray so.

In Jacob’s encounter with God I began to wonder if God allows Jacob to keep hold, knowing that Jacob needs to struggle a little longer to come to resolution. And another thing I wondered was if this was an example of a God who compromises. God will not tell Jacob his name but God will give a blessing. Perhaps a God willing to compromise is a model for our time.

Jacob did not merit the blessing afforded him. He knows he deserves wrath and so when Esau runs to meet him, throws his arms around him, kisses him with tears and expressions of love, Jacob knows he is indeed, on holy ground. Forgiveness is a transformative moment. Jacob has come face to face with God and with his brother, Esau, and he has prevailed because of God’s great mercy. May we have the courage to stand on holy ground. May we be those willing to share the joy of God’s great mercy today and in all the days to come.