

The Turning Point: 1. Nighttime Tumbles

Text: Genesis 32, selections

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There once was a man who had trouble sleeping at night. Bedtime usually started okay as he settled down and drifted off, but then somewhere in the wee hours he would begin to turn over and over in a fitful spell.

It was like he was caught in a vortex of restlessness. His tussling would get him all tangled up with the sheets and blankets – which made matters worse. And though his eyes were still closed, and he seemed to be sleeping, he really wasn't.

One particular night his wife tried to get some of the covers back. She yanked at them and told him to settle down and go back to sleep. "I can't," he half grumbled, "I've got way too much on my mind. I think it is God bothering me again."

She spoke back with sharp insistence. "Well dear, God's *not* bothering me. So either get over it with God or go down to the guest room where the two of you can work out the bothering somewhere other than here!"¹

What a perfect porch to get us into our scripture story for today! It is, indeed, a story of a restless night and some tossing in the dark. It centers on a man named Jacob who found himself ensnarled in a wrestling match with none other than God.

Of course, there's a long back-story to the whole thing.² Decades long, and nearly a lifetime ago when Jacob was a young man he was self-focused and unduly impressed with himself. Worse: he was cunning and deceitful with youthful arrogance.

Those can be such annoying attributes. And they became the source of estrangement for Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob, the younger brother by a breath, shrewdly outwitted his twin Esau for his birthright, and later, for of the blessing of their father.

It was now decades later and Jacob was heading back home to try to reconcile with Esau. He had done a lot of growing up in the ensuing years and was trying to make things right again. He hoped that Esau might understand and want that too.

So Jacob sent his family out ahead, across the Jabbok – which is a tributary of the Jordan River. He stayed alone on the far side in the hope that a good night's sleep before the primary task of the next day would keep him focused.

But then, right there, assuming himself safe and alone on the trailing edge, Jacob was overwhelmed by a nighttime adversary. It was an apparent stranger who came at Jacob suddenly and they wrestled and tumbled all the way through the night.

Jacob would not let the other go. Not for a nighttime's minute. But toward the break of day adversary tried to stop the encounter. "Not without your blessing," Jacob insisted. The Other asked for Jacob's name, always a first step in granting a blessing.

Just then, something came mystically clear. Jacob was being prepared the hard work of reconciliation. The outer tussle was reflective of an inner transformation, well underway. And that's what gave him the capacity to repair the breach with his twin.

But let's scratch deeper beneath the surface. Because there was far more going on in this nocturnal contest that can get lost if we pass by too quickly, especially if we imagine it as angry, violent, overly aggressive event of dominance and conquest.

Rembrandt portrayed an alternative that I favor.³ He painted a scene imbedded with gentleness as the two tumbled in a grasp of compassion-seeking-understanding. Their eyes conveyed it all: "This is serious work but there is no harm intended here."

As if to say that the work of inner transformation, of individuating, of maturation can and often does tumble us in darkness. And it most often involves a deep meeting God within the human heart. But it yields the most unexpected and fruitful kind of growth.

I am almost equally taken by stained-glass artist Martha Lewis, who portrays Jacob and his numinous guest, as gently engaged in a dance of the cosmic sort. Their bodies float near to one another, but never touch as they convey a moment of reckoning.

And it's true. There are times in life like that. When we are in a struggle, needing all of the dark to consciously protect ourselves, and all the while, we are unconsciously trying to resolve something so soul-deep that only God knows.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests something very helpful to me here. "This story of Jacob's wrestling," he wrote, "can be experienced best by its essential spaciousness" because it leaves so many places for us to pause and wonder.⁴

Let's take just one more step. Over the years, there have been lots of interpretations of this story, which frankly, I think is exactly what a biblical narrative like this should invoke. It's a layered story with more complexity than we can even begin to fathom.

Some say this wrestling contest was an actual event on the banks of the Jabbok just a little east of Jordan. Others yet have wondered if it was more likely a dream that Jacob had. Still others see it as a symbolic story, an instructive folktale of tremendous import.

I have come to see it an archetypal invitation evoking something deep in the souls of all people. It's an invitation from the lesser nature of ourselves to the better; from the self-centeredness that can be so much to the God-centeredness that makes people whole.

I see it as a story that even awful forms of estrangement and brokenness can be healed; that immaturity can someday be transformed, with a bit of help from our best Inner Guide; and that even the likes of long angry brothers can be reconciled.

My mentor, Tuck Gilbert, used to talk of moments when it felt like he had God's elbow in his ribs. Times when a nudge was trying to break through, and his yearning for healing was being aroused in some way.⁵ That fits here just right, too.

As you wonder it through, let me leave you with a poem.⁶ It puts Jacob and his wrestling, twin brothers reconciled, experiences in life that feel something like God's elbow provoking, and the fullness of things yet possible right in our laps:

God of life's struggles,
come and wrestle with me.
Let us spend a night to come
tumbling,
strength to strength,
locked in the embrace
that names
and blesses
and shatters my frame
so as to send me
limping
across the river:
alive, cleansed and forgiven.

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¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. Learning to Walk in the Dark. HarperOne, 2014, pp. 74 – 75.

² John A Sanford. The Man Who Wrestled with God. Paulist Press, 1981, pp. 36-44.

³ Hidde Hoekstra, ed. Rembrandt and the Bible. Magna Books, 1990, pp. 50-51.

⁴ Susan Blain, ed. Imaging the Word, Volume II. United Church Press, 1995, p. 251.

⁵ Chandler W. Gilbert. When I Open My Window. Grenfell Reading Center, 2001, p. 126.

⁶ Jan Richardson. In Wisdom's Path. Wanton Gospeller Press, 2012, p. 95.