**Sermon Genesis 32:22-31**

INTRODUCTION

I heard a sermon recently, while I was on vacation, that reminded me that our bodies tell stories. Now these stories are not in 6-words but in…scars, furrows, sags and stretch marks. Some of which we are proud of, others that can make us feel ashamed. But every mark, groove, and tan line, does tell a story. Your story. The story of where you’ve been and what you’ve gone through. And your body doesn’t lie. It doesn’t minimize the hardships you’ve been though, either in sickness, or because of an accident, or injury. Your body will bear the marks of those experiences. Neither does it glorify the hard labor, the work, or the stress you’ve had to endure. But it also can remind us of the joys we’ve had.

STORY

I’ve got a scar on the bridge of my nose from diving off a water slide into the pool on vacation and slamming right onto the bottom, opening up a gash that when I reemerged on the surface sent red streaming down my face and as I wiped blood and chlorine from my eyes, I can see my mother filming the whole thing on the family camcorder. I was 15 or 16 years old, and this was one of the last vacations we would take as a whole family and one that I cherish to this day. So, I don’t so much mind this scar…or the lines at the corners of my eyes, the even the few grey hairs that are beginning to show or the dent on my ring finger. They all retell the story of my life. That there’s a lot to belly laugh about and be grateful for, that my body is resilient but not invincible, it’s strong but not without its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Our bodies tell *full* stories, of both sorrow and joy, hardship as well as times of happiness.

LINK

So, it makes me wonder if years later when Jacob felt a stiffness in his thigh or a dull pain radiating through is leg whether he was transported right back to the night he wrestled God? I wonder what lessons might have flooded to the forefront of his mind as he winced in discomfort when he slept funny on his dodgy hip? Or what truths about himself and his treatment of others come to bear on his heart again as he remembers the person he was before struggling with the Divine?

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

You see, Jacob had done a lot of controversial things in his life and it wasn’t just stealing his Esau’s blessing (Gen 27:1-29, . Since the moment he grabbed his brother’s heel during birth, Jacob had been the kind of person who would do just about anything to get what he wanted, with little concern for how it would impact those around him. His name meant trickster or deceiver– and in a way, that meaning was a foreshadowing of the identity he would craft for himself. He deceived his uncle Laban, tricking him into giving away his strongest animals as wages (Gen 30:25-43). Jacob largely reaped the benefits of his cunning approach without accountability for his actions. But things were changing.

Our passage this morning, finds Jacob travelling towards Haran. And he is about to meet his older brother Esau, whom he had been estranged from since stealing his birthright. On one hand, he desperately wished to see his brother’s face and receive his favor (Gen 32:20). On the other hand, he was filled with fear; his brother may engage in war with him and destroy him and his family (Gen 32:11). Jacob had not forgotten Esau’s threat against his life (Gen 27:41), and prayed to God earlier in the chapter, “deliver me from the hand of my brother.” So, with nowhere to run from the trouble and uncertainty of the coming days. Jacob was forced to simply wait and see if his brother would enact revenge against him. He was struggling with feelings of worthiness and lovability (Gen 32:10), and in the darkness of the night he was likely experiencing his very own “dark night of the soul.”

The “dark night of the soul” is a state of feeling deeply disconnected from God, self, and others. Completely isolated and maybe even feeling depressed or in despair. This “dark night of the soul” can follow difficult experiences or come about in the midst of significant transitions. This periods of time are extremely difficult, they push and pull on the boundaries of our faith. And we feel like we’re confronting unsurmountable challenges, grappling and wrestling with feelings of worth, identity and purpose…but Christian mystics throughout the ages also tell us that these dark periods of wrestling have the potential to bring about great transformation and clarity. And so…as I reflected on our passage, my 6-word story for this week is: In darkness, truths can become visible. In darkness, truths can become visible. Yes, these “dark nights of the soul” may leave us feeling battered and bruised, depleted, and hurting, but God doesn’t abandon us there. God is present in the dark as well as the light. And God can whisper truths to us in the dark. And friend, what is true in the dark, is still true in the light. So, remember that in darkness, truths can become visible.

So, what truths might have been made visible for Jacob that night?

* Was it to somehow teach him to abandon his deceptive schemes and actions?
* Was it to transform him by a purging of the negative traits of his character?
* Was it to leave him with a permanent, bodily reminder that he wasn’t invincible, that actions have consequences?

I have to imagine that when Jacob found himself stretching or kneading his aching quad the lessons, he learned that night would be unforgettable, after all it *changed* him. He went into the night with one identity and came out with another. Blessed and christened Israel. This new name announced a new beginning for Jacob; his destiny in the world was no longer to live in the negative traits of the name Jacob, but as Israel, the “One with whom God struggles.” And in the darkness of that night, although his struggles were to continue, he would engage with them not as a deceiver or a trickster, but as one who was preserved by God. He would engage future challenges as Israel *not* Jacob. It’s now Israel, who limps away from this encounter with the Divine. And every time he sensed a discomfort in his body, he is reminded that he lives not because of his clever strategies or his power to manipulate others or trick them but because he has seen God face to face.

Friends, in darkness, in *our personal and private* darkness, truths, Divine truths, can become visible. In chapter 33 (verses 1-17), Jacob (now Israel), who saw God face to face and received divine favor, sees his brother face to face and receives his favor. And it is clear that Esau doesn’t not see his brother Jacob - a cheater and deceiver, someone not worthy of trust, but Israel, an injured, limping, imperfect person who has struggled to gain his brother’s favor (33: 8, 10, 15).

APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE

As we stumble in our own “dark nights of the soul,” as we wrestle with our own questions of identity and purpose, and our bodies ache or show the marks of all that we have experienced in life, it may be good to consider that those times of darkness may be the very time important truths can become visible. In may be in darkness, that the things within us that have been pushed into hiding, come out to tell their story. These things are not to be confused with evil. After all, it wasn’t evil that came to wrestle with Jacob in the night, but God. It was *before* day broke that Jacob was blessed. Still in the night. Still there in the dark. So, be encouraged you need not wait for dawn to find or experience God, to be embraced or blessed by God. It may in fact be in the night that “a new possibility can emerge within you.

CONCLUSION

Dear friends, we have our own reminders, etched on our bodies and on our minds, of all that we have experienced in life. The good and the bad, the joyful and the challenging, circumstances that caused us to be proud, other in which we are ashamed, and circumstances that plunged us into the dark, wrestling and grappling for hope and meaning. And it is there, in before the dawn break that you can be sure that God is with you, ready to transform you so that your future is not limited by your past, and friends, what is true in the dark, is still true in the light.