

The Blessing of Persistence

Genesis 32: 22-32

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“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble... You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this *soul-wrenching, existential struggle* for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, through decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time. Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe, because we must put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of nonviolence, is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression, and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the power of everlasting love be your guide.” (John Lewis essay, *New York Times*, July 30, 2020)

I’m sure you recognize these words...they are excerpted from the essay published by the *New York Times* on Thursday, July 30 and written by the late Congressman and civil rights activist John Robert Lewis. He had written the piece not long before his death on July 17. He

sent it to the *Times* and asked that it be published on the day of his funeral, a request that the newspaper honored.

Many of you know that, in addition to being a politician and activist, John Lewis was an ordained preacher. There is famous folklore about him preaching to the chickens on his family farm in Troy, Alabama when he was still a young child. In his public life he was fond of saying that he believed the chickens listened to him more than his colleagues in Congress did. Even before Mr. Lewis's funeral last Thursday, I had been thinking a lot about him and wondering what he would have made of this story of Jacob's all-night wrestling match with the mysterious figure at Peniel. Many of us would agree (I think) that our lives really are not characterized by one intense battle with God that we endure and put behind us. Instead, we find ourselves in a tussle with God many times – maybe even always. Perhaps there is a part of each of us that is forever at odds with God. We love God, we revere God...but often we don't understand God or God's responses to our prayers and questions.

Let's just set the stage a bit for the lead up to this confrontation between Jacob and the nameless man with whom he wrestled. Remember that last week we looked at the story of Jacob's dream, where he saw the ladder that connects us to God and God's messengers. When that dream happened, Jacob was on his way to stay with his mother's brother, Laban. He was running from the wrath of his twin brother, Esau, who was angered because Jacob had stolen the paternal blessing that belonged to Esau as the firstborn.

Esau was so furious that he wanted to murder Jacob, so Jacob went away to hide out for awhile and hopefully find a wife among his mother's extended family. Where we are today is that many years have passed while Jacob was in exile. Jacob has not one but two wives, the

sisters Leah and Rachel. He also has a couple of concubines, many children, and a lot of livestock. Jacob is now heading home, hoping to reconcile with Esau but also still afraid of Esau's wrath. Jacob has sent a gift of a whole lot of livestock to Esau, goats, sheep, cows, bulls, camels and donkeys. He hopes that by giving Esau such a big part of his wealth that he can ease Esau's anger and they can be in relationship again. Right before where I started reading this morning, Jacob says of Esau: "I may appease him with this present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face, and then perhaps he will accept me."

So, where we picked up the story today, Jacob is alone. He is contemplating the reckoning with his estranged brother, he has sent his large family on ahead of him, and he is grapples with the stranger all night long. We are never told for sure who the stranger is. Is it God whom Jacob wrestles all night long? Is it an angel, one of God's messengers? Why do they fight in the first place?

I believe

Jacob's wrestling with God is symbolic of the ongoing struggle that we all engage in – the constant duel between giving in to our worst impulses and our most selfish schemes versus becoming the people God created us to be. I can't imagine that God has been happy with some of Jacob's choices up to this point – especially the deceit that Jacob and his mother Rebecca used to get Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau. And yet, God still believes that Jacob is redeemable. In the dream of the ladder, God promises Jacob that he will be used to fulfill God's promise begun two generations before with Abraham. Now, God is trying to help Jacob become the person he is meant to be.

The

story also tells us that it is in struggle that we are transformed. We don't choose where or when or how it happens, but we will all have times and circumstances in life that require us to dig deep

and summon our greatest reserves of strength and resolve. I think that's what's going on with Jacob when he says to his adversary "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Jacob needs not only what he has within himself, he needs God's presence, God's grace, to prevail in the coming confrontation with Esau. Jacob is determined to wrest that blessing from God.

And in

this long night of grappling with God, Jacob becomes someone else. In the culture of that time, they believed that a name conveyed a person's self, their identity. Remember that "Jacob" means "trickster" or "one who supplants," a name that Jacob lived up to earlier in his life. But now the one with whom he wrestles says "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed." "Israel" means "one who strives with God," and even though the relationship with God isn't always easy, it must be more authentic after this honest meeting between the two. God blessed Jacob

after their encounter, but I want to suggest that Jacob already had at least one blessing from God, and that's the blessing of persistence. The physicality and intensity of their wrestling match would have turned other people away. I could see myself slinking away to put a heating pad on my dislocated hip and deciding to avoid direct meetings with God from now on. But not Jacob. He says to God "I am not going to let you go unless you bless me." And for his determination he is rewarded with more blessing. In Jacob's repentance of what he had done to Esau, and in his fear of their reunion, Jacob speaks of seeing Esau's face again. But before that could happen, Jacob came face to face with God and emerged as a better leader, a better person.

Maybe you remember what

happens when Jacob and Esau do finally meet face to face. Jacob is so sure there is going to be

violence that he divides his children up among their respective mothers and places them all behind him as he travels toward his brother. He hopes that when violence breaks out they will be able to escape. But Esau runs to his brother and embraces him. Both brothers weep.

Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Repentance. More and more blessings. All emerging from the blessing of persistence. Our brother John

Lewis knew about persistence. He was arrested no less than 40 times for his acts of civil disobedience. His skull was broken open with a police officer's billy club on the Edmund Pettus bridge as he marched from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery for black voting rights. He later said that he believed he would die in the violence of that moment. But, like so many of his fellow freedom fighters, John Lewis refused to let it go. He would not give up. I pray that we will follow his example, and that we will each search our hearts, find our part in the healing of our world, and pursue it with the grit, determination, and persistence that Jacob showed and Peniel. John

Lewis's essay pointed out that humanity has been locked in a "*soul wrenching, existential struggle*" for a very long time. The struggle is about whether or not we will continue to look upon the "other" as somehow "less than." It's about whether or not we will continue to allow some people in our country to be treated as second class citizens. It's about whether or not we will choose to live into God's vision of a unified, whole humanity. We must not give up. We have to persist – we cannot let go until we wrench out the blessings of racial equity and an end to discrimination. It is our turn to let freedom ring. As Congressman Lewis wrote so eloquently, may we walk with the wind, and let the power of everlasting love be our guide. Thanks be to

God. Amen.