

(with special thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor)

Those who have been part of the life of this congregation may remember a blessing sometimes offered at the end of the liturgy – (*He is the way, follow Him through the land of unlikeness....*) These are the last words, the final stanza of an extended poem of W. H. Auden called, *A Christmas Oratorio; For the Time Being*. Written in the midst of the turmoil of the Second World War, Auden's poem addresses the "wild prayer of longing" of the typical household in those days, laying bare his sense of the tepid, indifferent understanding of the power of God. One of the characters in the poem says:

O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth of waterclocks and hedges. Become our Uncle. Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his home-work, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.

Most of us choose our words more carefully than that, but if we were truly honest – especially with God – our yearning is the same; for protection, for prosperity, for a God who will operate within the domesticated boundaries we have set for ourselves without doing anything to frighten us unnecessarily. All of us want to be chosen. All of us want to be blessed and saved, only gently, please, by gradual degrees so that we can actually see where we are going and say, "Yes, this suits me fine. I can handle this, Show me more." It is a reasonable longing. No one in their right mind would invite being attacked, frightened, wounded. And yet this is how it comes sometimes, the presence and blessing of God, perhaps in the middle of the night, in the desperate wrestling that is the answer to our prayers.

In case you are unfamiliar with the story of Jacob, Esau, their mother Rebecca and father Isaac – this astounding story of sibling rivalry and deceit out-stripping anything taking place in our own families – reread the 25th through the 36th chapters of Genesis. Long a favorite, it marvelously told and filled with intrigue. Perhaps most importantly, it tells of a cheat and a rascal who undoes honor and everything good of middle-eastern family life. Nonetheless, Jacob remains the chosen of God. God's steadfast love for Jacob has occasioned wonderment and hope on the part of believers of every age – why would God favor such a character? And if God can embrace Jacob, then might all of us be favored as well?

Our story opens long after Jacob has stolen his brother Esau's birthright, his father Isaac's blessing and has gone off to follow his dream. It has been twenty years since Jacob has fled his brother's wrath, heading into the wilderness north of Beersheba where he dreams his famous dream of the ladder to heaven, proving that God is a part of every person's life, even and especially those who break all the rules, who stray from civility, decorum, and of doing good. Jacob is a liar and a cheat and still he gets the dream – his own holy vision of angels descending and ascending from heaven to earth. Like all the other events of his life it should have changed Jacob, yet it did not. Speaking to no one in particular, but loud enough for anyone at the top of the ladder to hear, he says, "*If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.*" Then dropping that false sense of religious piety, he switches pronouns. "*And of all that you give me, I will surely give one tenth to you*".

All of us have prayed that Bethel prayer at one time or another, listing the several conditions for our belief in God. The first phrase is all that is necessary, "If God will be with me...then the Lord shall be my God." But no. We persist in telling God what it means to be with us – to keep us safe, to feed and clothe us, to preserve our lives in peace. These are the signs we will accept. Should God choose some other way of being with us, the deal is off, or at least in question. There are other gods eager to do business with us, after all, promising more for less without all the guesswork.

Jacob has stolen two things of immense value: his brother's birthright, and his father's blessing. Conspiring with his mother, Rebecca, against his father, Jacob has succeeded in tearing the family apart. Then he fled with his birthright, his blessing, and picked up a dream along the way, finally arriving in Haran where he lived for many years. Domestic life was good for Jacob; two wives, two mistresses, eleven children and large herds and flocks and animals keeping him well fed and clothed. Then it was time to go home. "Return to the land of your ancestors and your kindred" the Lord said to Jacob, "and I will be with you". Again and in spite of his corrupted past, God promises relationship with Jacob.

So Jacob made ready to go. God had prospered him, even one as crafty and conniving as he. "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother." That was all he asked, his own life and the lives of his family. He had changed, but he could not imagine that Esau had, and he feared the brother whom he had robbed, not once but twice. In a late effort to repay the debt and grease his own homecoming, he sent hundred of animals ahead of him – great flocks of sheep and goats, camels and donkeys, moving across the countryside toward Esau.

A powerful restlessness got a hold of him that night and Jacob moved the remainder of his family across the river and returned to the other side alone. And then it happened. Like many of us who have had long restless nights of struggle, worry and wonder, Jacob begins to thrash about. He is seized by God, or what is sometimes referred to as an angel of God. They fight, a long and arduous fight, for they appear evenly matched. And then the sky begins to lighten. The stranger, as day is breaking, strikes Jacob on the hip, a painful wound that Jacob will carry for the rest of his life. And still Jacob will not let this stranger go. Then the stranger speaks: *Let me go, for the day is breaking.* Jacob, unsympathetic refused to let him go. And then, doing what he has done through the course of his whole life, does what is most familiar – Jacob cuts a deal. "I will not let you go, unless you bless me. And the stranger asks, what is your name? *Jacob*, he answers, meaning the holder of my brother's heel, the supplanter. And the stranger says: *You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel for you have striven with God.* Then the stranger blesses Jacob, now Israel and the nightlong struggle is over.

Many of us assume we know what is right and what is wrong. Many, if not most of us, have great difficulty embracing anyone, especially a stranger, who challenges these beliefs. In that richly troubling book called the Bible, God's best work takes place in what sometimes feels like total chaos, with people scared half out of their wits; Elijah, trembling under his broom tree, pleading with God to take his life; Mary, listening to an angel's invitation plunging her into scandal; Paul, lying on his back on the Damascus Road with all of his lights put out, unable to see anyone or anything. God often works in strange ways for it is the only way to get us to believe in God more than we believe in our own beliefs. Jesus was not the only one God sent to shake us up. God is always sending us people to disturb us – to wake us up, to yank our chains, to set us on fire – because about the worst thing that could happen to us, religiously speaking, is for us to hold perfectly still without changing a thing until we turn into fossils. God is not behind us, holding us back. God is ahead of us, calling us forward. Especially, God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people.

Sometimes such person is the mysterious stranger wanting to wrestle us through the long night hours. But most often God sends to us people so familiar to us that we simply overlook them – our own children and parents, our own friends and neighbors – all of the hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we really are. The closer they are to us, the more likely we are to ignore them, as did Jacob.

We have these stories full of God's graceful power reminding us like Jacob, that though we may have done some shameful and hurtful things in the past, God will not leave us nor abandon us. God is calling us even now to wake up, to see the stranger or the issue with which we are wrestling as the angel of God inviting us to take on a new name, a new way of being. Might each of us see and seize these opportunities.