

Sermon for Sunday, August 3, 2014 Gen. 32:22-31 "Night Visions"

How many of you didn't sleep well last night? Was it simply a matter of biology – you shouldn't have had that last glass of water at 10 pm – or were you tossing and turning over some problem in your mind? Did you have a bad dream from which you awoke in a cold sweat?

Yup. We've all been there.

I used to call them the two a.m. willies – unable to sleep, tossing and turning, dozing and having frightening dreams – and they usually were at their worst when I was worried about something. How was our business doing? Would I pass an exam in seminary? Was one of the kids going to get through a difficult challenge?

Two a.m. willies. They're not fun. Why is it that we are in the grip of them in the middle of the night? Why not in the daytime, when they don't seem quite so scary?

Science has some of the answers if you're having nightmares: eat the wrong foods before bedtime, take certain medications, be in a stressful situation, and you may end up with bad dreams.

Some think those nightmares are your psyche's way of sorting out and problem-solving, when you are sleeping and less likely to resist solutions. But what if you're awake when the willies come on?

Night-time panic attacks are not uncommon, particular if you're experiencing an extended period of stress. Some people with PTSD experience them.

If you have experienced nightmares, night terrors, or night-time panic attacks, you're probably shivering in your seats right now. They are no fun, and no one wants to be reminded of the experience. But they do happen...

...which leads me to wonder if Jacob, alone in his tent by the River Jabbok, is experiencing a nightmare, or a panic attack, or if God or an angel is wrestling with him, giving Jacob the two a.m. willies.

He would have good reason to have them. Remember, this is the guy who cheated his brother out of his inheritance. This is the guy who was going back to face that brother. Who knows if Esau was still ticked off after all these years? And Jacob was now a pretty successful guy. He was at risk for loss of his wealth as well as the possibility that Esau would physically attack him.

So we have this story. Jacob, away from his family, rests by the river. He has sent them on ahead. Is this because he is using them as human shields, or simply because he doesn't want them to be at risk by accompanying him? We don't know. But in the dark, he wrestles with a man. Is it an angel? Is it God? Jacob certainly thinks the latter, since he names the place "Face of God" – Peniel – when he departs the next day.

But is this frightening encounter, this midnight wrestling match, a dream or real? Is Jacob, as Jungian psychotherapists might guess, working out his problems and fears in his dreams? Is this a fevered imagination gone wild or a misinterpreted panic attack or is it God opening up a can of...well, you know what kind of can I'm thinking of...because of Jacob's less than stellar actions.

Jacob, the trickster tricked by Laban into fourteen years of labor to get the woman he loved. Jacob, the cheater, aided and abetted by his mother as he pulls the wool over his blind father's eyes. Jacob, the one who was second chronologically but is first in terms of bad behavior.

If you were God, and you had made a promise to Abraham about generation after generation of the Chosen people, and then this grandson of Abraham sins in stupid, sophomoric, venal ways...well, wouldn't you want to whack the guy one upside the head? Doesn't he deserve it?

But as in all the stories of the relationship between God and God's people, it's complicated.

God shows up to wrestle all night with this annoying guy, and the annoying guy cannot be wrestled into submission. So God whacks him HARD on the hip, dislocating Jacob's hip. That'll slow him down...

But even though he is slowed down, Jacob still continues the wrestling, now a verbal sparring. He says "Bless me." Now when we hear "bless me," we think warm and fuzzy. But this is still the same sort of wrestling that Jacob did with Esau, that same sort of striving to get what he wants, but doesn't seem to deserve. Jacob is saying "Gimme that blessing. We wrestled all night and you didn't beat me until you hit me on the hip joint." And God, who is probably a little tired of this guy, says "Okay. But riddle me this: what's your name?"

Jacob look at him a little suspiciously. Is this a trick? The trickster, exhausted, doesn't have it in him to come back with a snappy reply. He simply says, "Jacob."

And God says, "Yeah, well, you may say that, but I'm changing that. Your name is now Israel, because you have wrestled with God and with human beings and have prevailed." Jacob thinks, "umm, yes, that's what the word Israel means, but is this guy saying he's God, that wrestling with him was like wrestling with God?" So he asks the obvious question.

"You've got to tell me who you are."

The first rays of the dawn lighten the skies, and God says "yeah, right. I bless you." And then God is no longer there, at least not visibly.

The blessing that Jacob got, that first one, the inheritance and blessing from his father Isaac that caused his problems with his brother Esau, was a blessing that Jacob didn't deserve or earn. But the second blessing, the one from God, is one Jacob earned. He wrestled for it, all night long. He deserved it, not because he was perfect, but because he struggled and he suffered for his misdeeds.

Jacob, renamed Israel, the name of the Chosen nation. Jacob, an unlikely leader, an undeserving inheritor, nevertheless blessed.

There's a lesson for us here. I expect that none of us think of ourselves as God's chosen one. We are experts in explaining how we don't quite meet God's expectations. We regularly do bad things, stupid things, mindless mistakes that separate us from God's desires for us. We get the two a.m. willies when we think about that. We wrestle with God, saying "you're not giving me what I want right now!" And God keeps wrestling with us...not because God particularly enjoys wrestling, but because he wants us to recognize that we're not really wrestling with him, we're wrestling with ourselves, our own unhealthy wants and expectations. God wants to bless us, but sometimes we need to do the wrestling before we can even recognize who it is we are seeking a blessing from.

We are built to struggle, to wrestle, to sometimes go the harder route rather than the easier one. We are intended to engage God as two seemingly evenly matched wrestlers, trying to connect, trying to understand what it is we are trying to understand, what that blessing will mean.

Sometimes the only way we get to a place of blessing is by the wrestling at midnight. By the sweat and fear of the two a.m. willies. By the negotiation, by the question "who are you?" Sometimes we only know what the blessing is, and who bestows it, by the hard work of the middle of the night. The dark night of the soul. The questions. The wrestle. The sweat.

The blessing is there, if you're willing to wrestle for it, if you're willing to ask for it, and if you're willing to believe that you deserve it. Amen.