

HEALING AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

“STAGES OF THE HEALING PROCESS”

Fifth in a sermon series by James R Blades, Senior Pastor
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I am convinced that the Bible is the uniquely inspired Word of God.

For me this is not just an article of faith; it is my own experience of thirty years with the study of Scripture. “The word of God is living and active,” said the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament, “sharper than any two-edged sword, able to ... divide between the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” I cannot tell you how many times across these years an image, a story, a parable, a psalm or verse has penetrated to my deepest need!

This morning’s story of Jacob’s wrestling with God at the Brook of Jabbok is such a text. Here you find layer after layer of rich mystic meaning, a transformative whole person healing encounter that forever changed a man at the core of himself.

The Israel who walked away from the Brook of Jabbok was not the same Jacob who walked into it. Everything about the story highlights that. I believe it has some important things to say to us about God’s healing purposes in our lives.

This first of all: It was a **crisis** that led Jacob into his. For twenty years, Jacob had been a refugee from his homeland and now he was returning home. As Jacob and all his household approached the frontier of his homeland, Jacob got word that Esau was coming—the brother whose vengeance he had fled some twenty years before; the brother he had swindled and duped; the brother who, as far as Jacob knew, was still out to kill him. Esau was coming with 400 men.

All these years, Jacob had successfully escaped the painful realities of his life. Here at the Brook of Jabbok, Jacob’s own brokenness and terror confronted him. And it was the opening phase of his healing encounter.

How often it is true! It takes a crisis to get us on the road to healing.

Most people don’t just wander into a counselor’s office or a pastor’s office or a physician’s office or an AA meeting for help. It takes a crisis to get us there.

There at the Brook of Jabbok, as night fell not only on the land but on his very soul, we read that Jacob was left alone.

Alone with his terror.

Alone with his uncertainty.

Alone with the approaching consequences of his own errors.

But not entirely alone, for in the same verse, paradoxically, is says Jacob wrestled *with a man*. Who was the man? Well, who do you wrestle with when you are alone with your predicament? Is it not, first of all, yourself? I believe it was so for Jacob. He wrestled with his own panic, his own guilt, his own deceit, his own uncertainty of what his brother would do. But in that wrestling with self, someone else was entering the mystical match: God.

Jacob’s wrestling with himself became his wrestling with God. Now I’ve been to wrestling matches and I can’t think of a sport that puts you in closer proximity: Your nose in someone’s armpit or worse! Jacob’s wrestling with God was his struggle to finally *surrender*. No longer self-sufficient. No longer handling matters on his own. It was his desire to get God’s blessing that kept Jacob straining in the struggle, “I won’t let

you go until you bless me,” he cried. But in order to get that blessing Jacob was going to have to give something up, let something go: the control of his life.

Most of us tend to rely on ourselves, to trust in ourselves as long as our life’s events remain within the circle of our power to control. But then along comes a **problem** that we can’t solve, a **pickle** that we can’t get out of, a **predicament** whose outcome we cannot control and it is there we reach out to God’s grace and guidance. And what do we find? We find that God was waiting all along—not to condemn but to engage us; not to castigate but to help us, not to rub our nose in our broken things but to heal us in the midst of them.

Such was Jacob’s discovery at the end of his tether. “I will not let you go unless you bless me, change me, heal me.”

“What is your name?” countered the divine wrestler. That seems a strange question. Don’t you figure God already knew Jacob’s name?

In those days, a person’s name wasn’t just an I.D. It was the core of his character. When God asked Jacob, “What is your name?” God wasn’t looking for an introduction but for a self-revelation.

Who are you? said God. “I am *Jacob*” came the answer; which in the Hebrew means *usurper, trixter, deceiver*. Jacob’s naming of himself was his coming-to-terms with himself: with the dark and broken side of his own character. It was, as some people call it, Jacob’s “moment of truth.”

Such self disclosure is the third stage of the healing process. First, crisis. Then surrender. Then self-disclosure.

Here’s a simple illustration to help put this progression into perspective. You have a pain. That’s the crisis. You go to the doctor and that in itself is a step of surrender, an admission that you can’t do this on your own, that you need help. And when the doctor sits down with you in the examining room, what is the first thing the doctor asks? “So, tell me,” she says, “what seems to be the problem?”

Putting words to our symptoms, putting words to our fears and sorrows, disclosing who we are is a necessary step in every healing process whether we’re looking for the help of a therapist or a doctor or the Spirit of God.

“My name is Jacob,” he said.

Now look carefully at how the divine personage answers Jacob’s self-revelation: “Your name will no longer be *Jacob* (Usurper), but *Israel* (Prevailed with God).”

Isn’t it an interesting paradox? That **the key to unlocking what we have the potential to be is the frank confession of what we are**; the doorway to blessing is not the air-brushing of our sins, sorrows and shortcomings but the frank confession of them.

Then Jacob turned the question around, saying “Please tell me *your* name.” But the mysterious mystical wrestler replied, “Why is it you ask my name?” Jacob was inquiring about the very heart of God’s glorious nature. Such a question could not possibly be answered. Why? Because God’s nature and therefore God’s name, is far beyond our narrow human powers of comprehension to grasp! But though God did not returned a revelation to Jacob, God gave Jacob something else: “... God blessed him there.” *There* at the hour of his crisis. *There* at the juncture of his utter weakness. *There* at the place of his painful self-admission. God blessed him just *there*.

So Jacob named the place Peniel, for *he said*, “I have seen God face to face ...” which is often the next stage of the healing process: Self understanding.

In his confession of who he is, Jacob gains insight: a new understanding of who God is, and of who Jacob is in the eyes of God and what Jacob can become.

Have you not often observed it to be true: that in the very putting into words what troubles us, we gain insight. In the very verbalizing of what is hidden in the darkness, we see light. In the very talking out of what is inside, to a group or a journal or trusted friend or counselor, we have those “Aha!” moments of divine insight. We see a glimmer of a reflection of God’s countenance.

Now here’s something else worth noting. Jacob’s healing encounter with God was not a moonlight dance. Not a waltz by the water feature. Jacob *wrestled*. Every muscle is engaged. Every sinew is put to the stress. Every attention is focused.

Jacob had to *wrestle* for his blessing. He had to struggle and strain for it. He had to hold on tenaciously and refuse to give up or give in. Such is the quest for wholeness. Such is the price of healing, whether physical or psychological or relational or spiritual. “Let me go,” said the Angel.” “No way,” said Jacob. “I will not let go until I get the blessing.” Call it tenacity! Doggedness! Resolve! Persistence! Perseverance! That’s what the healing journey takes.

The most courageous people I have ever known are people who, like Jacob, refused to give up on their healing. When they got taken down, they refused to stay down. When life’s hardship dealt them a crippling disappointment they hung on with impudence and refused to let go of hope.

Do you happen to think God’s healing grace should descend on you like a cloud while you fold your hands and pray? Do you imagine that wholeness will alight on you without stress or strain? Do you expect that the road to Life will rise up to meet you, without sorrows and setbacks, troubles and tears, three steps forward and two steps back? Then think again. “The road to life is *what*,” said Jesus? “Hard!”

There’s something else very important to be observed in this passage. “Now the sun rose upon Jacob just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh.” Jacob came out of his struggle with something beside a blessing, didn’t he? He came away injured from his struggle with God and Life. And so do many of us. We carry limps from old injuries, scars from old wounds.

“You’ll get over that old pain, that old sorrow, that old disappointment someday,” someone says. But we never really do get *over* it. We carry the hobbling marks of old wounds the rest of our lives, and maybe to some degree into the next. I beg to remind you that the resurrection body of Jesus still retained the wounds of his life’s ordeal.

We don’t just *get over* the wounds of old struggles. But here’s what we can do. We can *embrace* them as part of ourselves, *invite* them to enrich our wisdom about life, let them motivate us in our empathy for others, remind us of our need of God.

“The sun rose upon Jacob” as he limped into the land of his inheritance. He had faced his crisis, squared off with himself, wrestled with God, held tenaciously to life. And it was the dawn of a new day.

“Out of every crisis,” wrote author Nena O’Neil, “comes the chance to be reborn.”

May we pray?

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of life: for its wonders, friendships, pleasures, romances. We thank you too for its challenges, hardships, and disappointments. They

remind us that you do not just hand us a ready-made world but that you have entrusted to us too the work of healing.

Help us O God not to miss the opportunities that our predicaments conceal: the opportunities to grow and to learn; opportunities for empathy and understanding, opportunities for transformative change.

We pray earnestly for those who have most recently been hit by the crises of our trouble-torn world. We pray for those who, in this hour, are trying to sort through the wreckage of their shattered lives. Give them a sense of your empowering presence and the peace of your Spirit that surpasses all understanding.

Light for us as a nation and as a people, O God, the way to the recognition of our own darkness, and thus to the healing of our ills.

As we head into this week, not knowing what challenges and opportunities await us, guide us O God. Strengthen us. Give us the courage and compassion to do the healing work you have put into our hands to do.

Amen.