

When I was away last week I was with friends from Iowa who were visiting Vermont and another friend from Harrisburg who had a brief work commitment then took some vacation time in Maine. The fall foliage was not our main reason for being there, but we did notice that even up there, the fall colors were less impressive than usual, presumably because the hotter, drier summer extended even 10 hours to the north. In one store in Vermont, I heard a couple from Texas and another from Australia press the clerk on where to find the prettiest leaves—as if the locals have a super-secret forest that they keep hidden from us tourists. But they had traveled much farther than I had, mainly for the leaves, and they were not about to give up on the spectacular autumn views for which the region is famous, even if Mother Nature has been uncooperative. As I drove past so many trees still struggling to transition between seasons, I thought of how many friends and communities have been wrestling lately with making changes and discerning the future.

*Discernment* is that churchy word we use to describe making prayerful, wise, Spirit-filled decisions: call committees choosing a new pastor, or pastors sensing a call to a congregation; synods electing a bishop; students choosing careers; couples tying the knot or having a child. And, besides these joyful, exciting changes, discernment is also doctors and patients choosing when to stop treatment and begin palliative care; it's infirm or aging folks deciding when the risks of living alone outweigh the benefits of independence. As people of faith, we'd like to ask for and receive quick and easy signs: a cloud formation spelling out "yes" when we are questioning our next steps. But life's consequential decisions are rarely brief or easy struggles.

By the time Jacob arrives at the Jabbok River, he is already an accomplished wrestler of blessings. This is Jacob who was born grabbing the heel of his twin brother Esau. He made a famished Esau trade his birthright for a bowl of stew and tricked their blind, dying father into giving him Esau's blessing. After he runs away from Esau's wrath, *he* is tricked into working for 14 years in payment for marrying Rachel, whom he loved, and her sister Leah, whom, we surmise, he loved less. Then Jacob tricked his father-in-law to make his own fortune, meaning he again had to escape payback for his deception. So he's headed back home when he hears that his estranged brother Esau is coming to meet him with an army of hundreds. He splits up his family so that they'll have a chance to escape if Esau attacks, and Jacob is left alone in the night at the river.

This episode is sometimes referred to as Jacob wrestling with an angel, but from his naming the place *Peniel*, Jacob seems to believe this was God himself in human form. It is not a brief battle, and however we understand the identity of Jacob's rival—as God or as a messenger from God—this divine wrestler does not easily defeat Jacob, as we might expect. It almost sounds like he takes a cheap shot, knocking Jacob's hip out of joint to end the match before daybreak, likely in keeping with the idea that human beings cannot bear to see the full glory of the Lord as Jacob

would have if the sun came up and darkness no longer obscured his opponent. Yet Jacob still does not let go; he's injured, but he's lasted this long, and he's not giving up that easily. *I will not let go unless you bless me*, he says. The blessing comes in the form of a new name, *Israel*, which means *to strive* or *struggle with God*. Not only has Jacob wrestled with God, Jacob won! The divine contender affirms that in both his dealings with humans and this contest with God, Jacob prevailed.

What does this victory mean for Jacob? It's implied that he lived with the injured hip for the rest of his life, so he is forever changed by this encounter with God, and not entirely in a way that he would have chosen. But he recognizes that he has been in the presence of the Divine, and that recognition came *after* this long, difficult struggle, *because of* this struggle, and not in spite of it. The part I love best about this story is that it's not just Jacob who takes the name Israel, but all of his descendants choose to refer to themselves as the people of Israel. They could have identified with Adam, or Noah, Abraham or Isaac, Moses or David. But the whole people of God think of themselves as belonging to Israel, as the ones who *struggle with God*. We could certainly describe scripture as the story of God's people struggling with God, and God blessing them, usually not because of *their* righteousness or *their* faithfulness—Jacob was a scoundrel, after all—but because of God's righteousness and God's faithfulness to them.

What does Jacob's victory mean for us? First of all, God can withstand our struggle; we don't need to be afraid to question, to wrestle, even to rage as we attempt to answer God's call to faithful living and as we engage God in study, worship, and prayer. Jacob's example doesn't give us much hope for quick, easy answers; we might need to employ some of the persistence we read about in today's gospel and remember that it was by *going through* his struggle that Israel recognized God and received God's blessing—a blessing that changed *him*, not the mind or will of God, who is already merciful, loving, and faithful to us. If you're not in a period of seeking or struggle or discernment right now, just wait; we all find ourselves in those places sometimes. And when we do, when we feel as though we are wrestling in the dark, we can be sure that we are not alone; that's God there with us, inviting us to keep striving. May we not let go until the sun rises and we can perceive how the God of love and light has blessed us.