

Jacob has been a long time away. Sure, he has prospered – and his family and fortune have grown – but he is returning ‘home ’after a long absence....and he didn’t leave under the best of circumstances.

At odds with his brother Esau over the inheritance – an inheritance (and blessing) that Jacob won by trickery. Esau’s anger causes Jacob to flee. Jacob is tricked himself along the way, by his father-in-law Laban, and with that relationship now similarly frayed, Jacob has to figure out how to make peace with his brother.

His preparations are complex. He arranges his huge collection of family and servants and livestock and such in a way designed to impress – even overwhelm – Esau. He plots and he plans so that some portion of what he has earned and built might be preserved from what he imagines will be his brother’s wrath. And, ever the trickster, he sends all and sundry on ahead, while he waits at the river’s edge. And there, by the Jabbok, he wrestles through the night with a mysterious man.

Of all the Patriarchs, Jacob/Israel is the most intriguing to me. He ultimately gives his name to a nation - his twelve sons mark for us the twelve tribes (mirrored by Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples.) And then, there’s this legendary ‘battle with God.’

Jacob knows how to win. He has bested his brother in a contest for inheritance. He has thrived in a competition with his uncle, in which he gained wives and wealth. But here he struggles against the unknown. His persistence earns him a new name, and offers us a lesson on the nature of competition.

A man who knows how to win against the omnipotent Almighty. Dusk till dawn with no clear winner. What can we learn from this stalemate?

It's not unusual to hear someone say that they struggle with God. I met someone recently who reminded me that God "is a funny old dude," full of complexities and hard to figure out. The state of the world on any given day can raise real questions of our faith, and - by extension, for God.

"Why?" Is a powerful prayer.

These struggles with God are very pointed and come from a place of real faith. Jacob - even while he wrestles with an unknown opponent - is fighting for equilibrium: he is no longer out to win; it can be argued that his goal is not to lose. This is a humbled man - not seeing superiority, but some sort of even-handed understanding.

I went to a protest on Wednesday. Two groups with deep convictions. I could not stay through the speeches - I did not make it to the end - but a friend observed 'They all seemed so angry - and there was nothing but smiles on our side...'

I've been involved with conversations about inclusion and justice for LGBTQI folks quite often at national committees and General Assemblies of the PCC.

I remember telling someone along the way that it was very possible that both sides were wrong - it always felt like a noble sentiment, but I had no sense of an alternate solution. And then a few years ago, it happened. A 'both-and' "solution" that allows people to choose their path through the question.

Whether you are in favour of inclusion/same sex marriage/ ordination or not, you can find a place in our denomination. It was a compromise that makes both sides uncomfortable. A stalemate.

Not equality - there is still some striving to be done. Not victory, that anyone might claim superiority (though that still happens.) Stalemate.

Now a tie is no one's favourite outcome. Jacob is left with a limp to remind him of his struggle. Everyone carries their scars a little differently. But a tie ought to help you think differently - perhaps even favourably - of your opponent. Maybe there is some hope in that for us.

For God is not a game to be won, or an opponent to be conquered. The disciples concerns over who might be greatest among them are quickly dispersed when Jesus tells them of the true nature of the game: it is to be 'played' in humility. Your greatest weapon in the contest is hospitality. The winners (so called) are those who show vulnerability, curiosity, eager, innocent joy - like children so often do.

We're once again told that child-like is better than childish - if you are looking for the kingdom of God.

Because God has not challenged us to a duel. Faith is not a 'winner-take-all' contest; not a race to the heavenly prize. Jesus calls us to engage the world with love and humility. We will encounter anger and be tempted to 'do battle,' but our battles are fought with different weapons. We're meant to diffuse, not destroy. And in the end, we might all come away limping. Victory is not standing over our fallen enemies, shouting our glory to the world. Victory is a slow walk in a new direction, having met God in the process - met God and learned something in the encounter. "Those who welcome me," says Jesus, "Welcome the one who sent me." The greatest among us - the most humble, the most vulnerable among us - are those who have found God in the fight, and live to tell the tale. Limping, learning, and finding a way forward. That is the goal. That is our hope.