November 9th

THE NEW SHOFAR

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. ***Isaiah 40:31***

What works best - God's way or mine?

In **Genesis 32** we have the curious narrative of Jacob wrestling with God. Jacob did not know that when he had earlier on prayed for God's salvation from death and for deliverance from his worst fears that this would lead to a wrestling match! As Jacob stood on the banks of the Jordan River, he was alone in the dark, facing a terrifying unknown. His brother Esau's death threats were the reason Jacob had fled twenty years ago. Now Jacob was returning home, and Esau was coming to meet him. With an army of soldiers. God took advantage of this moment—when Jacob was most vulnerable and in danger—to confirm the truth about his own divine identity as well as that of Jacob .The narrative also tells us something of the true nature of sacred history.

The Wrestling match – Hebrew loves puns

To understand the mystery behind this admittedly odd narrative, we need to see it as God entering inner depth of Jacob, into his heart and mind where his inner turmoil rages. God does not reveal his identity until after the fight has ended, a wrestling match that consumed the entire night. Ironically, God could not escape Jacob's grasp, even though Jacob received a painful blow. God held fast to Jacob, and Jacob held fast to God. Jacob could not have struggled as he did with God if God did not choose to be engaged. It is only through the night long fight that both God's and Jacob's identities are revealed.

The Hebrew text reveals a word play that is not evident in the English. The word play is between Jacob (***Yaaqo****b*), the Jabbok (**Yabboq**) River, and "wrestle" (**Yeabeq**). **Yaaqov**, which means "he grasps the heel," was standing at the **Yabboq** River, meaning "empty" because it empties into the Jordan River, when God began to wrestle (**Yeabeq**) with him. Jacob's refusal to let go of God prompted his name change. God changed Jacob's identity to Israel (**Yisra-el**), which means "***God*** **fights**," even though God claims that **Jacob** is the one who fought and overcame. The word for "**fight**" (**sarah**) is translated as ***enischuo*** in the Greek, meaning "**to grow strong, make strong, invigorate, empower, or receive strength"** and is used in **Luke 22:43** when an angel appeared to Jesus and ***strengthened*** **him** in the Garden of Gethsemane.

God fights with us and for us

The name Israel - **Yisra-EL** (***EL*** is the Hebrew word for God) affirms that God initiated the struggle and that God is committed to stay with Jacob in the struggle. God affirms his promises to Jacob through the wrestling by allowing Jacob to survive. It is through a painful struggle with God that Jacob truly sees God and lives. A life-threatening situation turned into life-changing moment of revelation and redemption. Jacob/Israel struggles and triumphs in the face of overwhelming odds.

What is notable in the story is the absence of any mention of God's approval of the deceitful way Jacob had tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing instead of Esau his older brother. What we do find in 25:23 is that Jacob's eventual leadership over God's chosen people will be the result of divine appointment not human effort. Ultimately, it is to fulfill the prophecy, and because of Jacob's activities, that God puts Jacob through the ordeal of wrestling, eventually transforming the ***crafty Jacob*** into the ***upright Israel***, only now a worthy candidate for leadership. God will do things according to a divine plan and not through human sin, treachery or ambition.

Struggling with our inner demons

The lifetime feud between brothers weighed Jacob down. It was not just actual fear of Esau's threatened retaliation for past events (Gen. 27:41) that haunted Jacob. It was the fear of facing the fact that he had taken something that was not his and had fooled his father into cooperating. As implied by his name, *Ya'akov*, Jacob recognized he had behaved "**deceptively."** Read in this way, Jacob did not wrestle an angel; he struggled with the demons inside of himself. Winning the fight that night, therefore, represented a new phase in the development of Jacob's character. If Jacob's new name, Israel—in Hebrew ***Yisra'e****l*—is related to the root ***y-sh-r***, meaning "upright," then the new name is an antonym of his old name., for he was far from being an upright man. Jacob's confrontation, struggle, and triumph leading to his transformation into Israel changed his persona at the core. Jacob, once crafty, cunning, and conniving, will now be Israel, straight, strong, and upright in his ways. That is the transformation that comes about through a genuine encounter with God.

God is engaging with you at this very moment in ways you may least expect. He knows how to counter our thoughts and moves to give us a new name and redeem us toward our identity. He enters our darkest nights and deepest fears in unexpected ways to bring about his revelation and redemption in our lives. How is he manoeuvring with you in ways that seem contrary to what you would expect? Stay in the struggle, especially when you feel debilitated in the face of overwhelming odds.

We cannot steal God's blessings – they are freely given

Jacob has prevailed, he won — his adversary himself says so — but his new identity, which he has received from the adversary himself, affirms and bears witness to God's victory. And when Jacob in turn asks his opponent his name, the latter refuses to say it, but reveals himself in an explicit gesture, giving him the blessing. The blessing that the Patriarch had requested at the beginning of the struggle is now granted him. However, it is not a blessing obtained through deceit – like his previous one - but one given freely by God, which Jacob can receive because he is now alone, without protection, without cunning or tricks; he gives himself over unarmed, agrees to surrender and confesses the truth about himself. Therefore, at the end of the struggle, having received the divine blessing, the Patriarch can finally recognize the other, the God of blessings: Truly, he says, *I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved*, and now he can cross the ford, the bearer of a new name but "conquered" by God and marked forever, limping because of the injury he received (v. 31).