

“Pain at Peniel”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ August 6, 2023

Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14:13-21

Lee Burke is a woman in her 50s. She was married and working as an executive at a real-estate company. But after the abuse began, she left her husband, her job, her money --everything. She found it easier to suffer alone.

"It's like being slammed into a wall and totally destroyed. It makes you want to pull every hair out of your head. There's nothing I can do to defend myself."

And the attacks just keep coming, day after day after day. But her assailant is not an abusive spouse. Not a violent criminal. Not a street punk or a rogue cop. Instead, it's pain. Chronic pain.

Lee Burke underwent surgery for a brain tumor eight years ago and awoke with an unforeseen and inexplicable problem -- lightning-hot headaches that knock her out for periods ranging from four hours to four days.

Chronic pain is defined as continuous pain that lasts longer than six months, and it afflicts an estimated 30 to 50 million Americans, with social costs in disability and lost productivity that add up to more than \$100 billion every year. To make a comparison, that is like the population of the top 10 cities in the United States or 20 of the least populated states added together all suffering long term pain.

In the Old Testament, Jacob knew chronic pain. In today's lesson from Genesis, he crosses a stream called Jabbok and immediately plunges into an all-night wrestling match with a mysterious divine being. When the

mystery man sees that he cannot put Jacob on the mat, he strikes him on the hip socket and throws Jacob's hip out of joint.

The pain is like an ice pick in the side, but Jacob hangs on tight.

"LET ME GO," wails the man, "FOR THE DAY IS BREAKING." Although he is suffering in agony, Jacob mutters, "I WILL NOT LET YOU GO, UNLESS YOU BLESS ME" (Genesis 32:26).

The man asks for Jacob's name, and then says to him, "you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (v. 28). Jacob is given a new name, "Israel," which means "the one who struggles with God," because he has struggled all night and endured. At the end of the very darkest night of his soul, after wrestling with a man who turns out to be God, he is given a new name and a new identity. His struggle transforms him.

A few important spiritual lessons are suggested here. But first, let us be clear that the spiritual life is not about pain -- necessarily. When you sign up to walk with God you are not signing on for abuse and misuse, rejection, and dejection. When we encounter such experiences, with God beside us, we are in a great position to deal with it. But it is not part of the contract.

What is true, however, is that when we have a true encounter with God, we are never the same. Meeting God is a transformational experience, and if we are not a transformed people, we are not God's people.

The transformation was certainly evident in Jacob's life. He was given a new name, and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. But he wobbles into the future with something worth cherishing -- an entirely new outlook.

Before his all-nighter, Jacob was known as "The Deceiver," the brother who grabbed the heel of his twin in the womb and then did everything in his power to supplant, trip up and replace his sibling. But when Jacob limped to the other side of the stream, he was a transformed man, one who was both broken and blessed.

This is the other lesson of Peniel: Pain can break us or bless us. Jacob had no interest in being "The Supplanter" after his painful struggle with God; he was done with those sly, selfish, and sinister schemes. Instead, Jacob wanted only to bow before his brother and beg his forgiveness. He wanted to act in a way consistent with his new name "Israel," act like someone who has struggled with God and humans and prevailed. Limping toward Esau in the morning, Jacob has no interest in supplanting his brother. Instead, he bows himself to the ground, desiring only mercy. Esau rushes rapidly toward Jacob, but rather than executing him for his evil deeds, he embraces him. He falls on his neck and kisses him, and together they weep.

"Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God," says Jacob through his tears, "since you have received me with such favor" (33:10). The pain of Peniel has transformed not only Jacob, but his relationship with Esau as well.

The point of this story is not that pain is good, but that it can transform us in positive ways. It would be wrong to assert that God somehow desires our suffering, afflicting us with the kind of chronic pain that can worsen over time.

And yet, it is true that God can use our struggles to save us. Left to our own devices, we so often behave like Jacob, engaging in all types of trickery in our ambitious attempts to grab for ourselves as many birthrights and blessings as we possibly can. It is only when God engages

us in struggle, and wrestles us to the ground, that we see the path that is proper and pure and truly life-enhancing for us.

The problem is, such a change of plans can be painful. We tend to pull muscles when we stretch in new directions, moving from selfishness to sacrifice. We get disjointed when we reach new heights of honesty and integrity. We feel our insides churning when we let go of our craving for control and step out in faith for the first time.

Limping onto a new path is not always pleasant, but with God at our side we know that we are both broken and blessed. Jacob held tightly to the Lord throughout his all-night struggle, and so should we -- this firm grip is the only assurance we have that we are part of a process that is changing us for the better.

Power is made perfect in weakness.

Compassion is made stronger in suffering.

Sensitivity is made sharper in adversity.

Dependence on God is made rock-solid in situations of struggle.

While chronic pain is not part of God's plan for us, he can certainly use pain -- along with all the other experiences of life -- to change us for the better.

In the end, Jacob's encounter with God at Peniel transformed his life, linking him to the Lord and to his brother in ways he never dreamed possible.

May our experience of pain do the very same.