Limping home

Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, October 17, 2010: The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Genesis 32:22-31 and Luke 18:1-8.

I am not an athlete. The whole concept never really worked for me even though I see again and again what being one can do for people. They get all sorts of prizes, and I like prizes. The problem is that one of the basic tenets of athleticism simply eludes me. I do not now and never have understood that "no pain, no gain" business. I am much more resonant with a "no pain, no pain" approach to life. When I have heard the runners in my life speak of their experience with endorphins, which supposedly bring euphoria of unparalleled delight—as in "running is better than this or that"— I frankly either disbelieve them altogether or conclude that they are not correctly doing the activity to which they are positively comparing the runner's high. I think you get my drift.

All of that is to say that my coming to embrace the story of Jacob as definitional, even crucial for me and for all of us as human beings, was not an easy trip. It is not that it is hard to understand Jacob or for that matter to be drawn to him. From beginning to end he is a marvelous and compelling character, the stuff of which great sagas are made. The problem is that in his twisted and difficult life journey, we confront ourselves in all our magnificence and in our immense penchant for duplicity.

You remember the story of Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. As this great patriarchal myth unfolds, we learn from the beginning that trouble is coming. Rebekah, pregnant with Jacob and his twin Esau, realizes even within her womb that the twins already are at war, foretelling what would be their lifelong struggle with one another. Esau, born first, hairy and rough, becomes a hunter, a man's man, beloved of his father. Jacob, though scrappy (we are told that he grabbed his brother by the heel even as he was born), born smooth and beautiful, cherished by his mother, becomes a man who "dwells in tents," which is Hebrew for he stays inside reading rather than hunting with his macho brother.

As the story continues, Jacob, with his mother's coaching, tricks Isaac into granting him the blessing of the birthright, which should have gone to Esau, the first born. When his betrayal is discovered, Jacob flees home to begin a life of separation from his family in another land far away, where he picks up a couple of wives and becomes quite wealthy as a breeder of fine cattle. Deceiving his father-in-law plays a big part in his accumulation of wealth. The setting for our passage this morning is that the jig is up; Jacob's highly successful run as a trickster has come to an end. Laban, his father-in-law, is on to him; and now with no other option available to him, he must return to Canaan to face the brother whom he had defrauded so long ago.

At the most vulnerable point of his life, Jacob stops at a fork in the River Jabbok (of course, he is at a fork; each detail is marvelously symbolic). As he falls asleep in the darkness of night, he finds himself in the struggle of a lifetime with a mysterious and foreboding creature. Not a stranger to scrapes, he has always managed to escape just under the wire; but this time, after years of "no pain, no pain," he has the good sense—or the desperation—to go the distance. The scripture says that after wrestling the whole night long with this "mysterious man," Jacob simply will not let go. He clings to him as though his life depends upon it—as indeed it does. Even when the man finally says, "Let me go for the day is breaking," Jacob says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." When finally he is blessed, Jacob comes to realize that the individual with whom he has struggled through the long and arduous night is in fact God.

But the blessing has not come easily and will long be remembered. Jacob limps away, permanently

marked with a dislocated hip. This account from Genesis is not a precursor of the story of the Prodigal Son—no soft God poised on the porch of the homestead, eagerly waiting to welcome Jacob home. Jacob's homecoming is a hard landing but one in which this wonderful shyster has come home, finally truly home—to himself and to God.

Isn't that an amazing story? More than amazing, it is our story. Show me someone on a spiritual path who is not limping from the struggle, and I will show you someone who has not yet arrived at Penuel, one who has not yet seen God face to face and lived to tell it. It was only when in the darkness of the night Jacob could face the unmistakable truth about himself that he was transformed not into a perfect man but into a man who would not let go, a man for whom the search for God was more important than anything else in the world. At long last, Jacob knew that he had to have the real blessing, not the blessing that comes from family or convention but the blessing that comes only from God, a blessing that can be received by us only when we stand before it adorned with authenticity.

Mythical and archetypal? Certainly. Told in archaic and not inoffensive language of multiple wives and slaves? Absolutely. And, yet, it is a story that I know to be deeply true: "no pain, no pain" does not work, not finally. I don't know why it has to be so hard; for the record, I am not sufficiently edified in answering this question by the notion of our original sin. But I do know this to be true: some power in or around us draws us away from our best selves, our deepest truth, and to find our way back to God, to that place of raw and liberating honesty before ourselves and God, is a lifelong endeavor that is simply never easy.

In a remarkable exchange between Carl Jung and Bill W., one of the co-founders of AA, Jung diagnoses the underlying issue for alcoholics as a spiritual problem and in doing so speaks of the basic need of all human beings. Regarding a mutual acquaintance, he wrote, the man's "craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language as the union with God." Dr. Jung concludes his letter by quoting Psalm 42: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God."

With all my heart I believe that Jung is right: only God can fill the spiritual void of our lives and that search, no matter how we are maimed by it, is the life to which we are called. For me, it is important to acknowledge that I do not believe for one moment that God blows up our lives to see if and how easily we shall find God in the chaos. I find that image of God so abhorrent that, forced to believe that way, I'd just give up. But for reasons beyond my capacity to understand, it does seem that it is when the darkness is at its darkest, when all we have to offer is the brokenness of our most honest selves, God comes, unmistakably visible to us in the struggle. In faith, I, of course, claim that God has been there all along, that we just don't see God as easily when all is lightness and joy; but in practice, I declare that it is in the darkness of life that I have most thoroughly and dramatically known God.

The passage ends: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip." Jacob limped toward an uncertain ending of his story; he had no assurance of how he would be received by Esau and deserved whatever came. But as he limped away, the sun rose around him. My guess is that the sun had never shown so brightly and that for the first time in Jacob's long and storied life he knew that regardless of what was to come, all would be well—for he had found God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.