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Scripture: Genesis [32:22-31](#) and [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Many of you know that Robyn Miller, a dearly loved Pilgrim, had hip replacement surgery last week. When she was out of surgery, still in the swirl of “Who am I?” and “Where am I?” and “What am I on?,” she received text messages from an unknown number with photos of peaches. And she thought, “I love peaches. Peaches are great. ...why is someone sending me pictures of peaches?”

Turns out, it was not a peach; it was her hip joint that had been replaced. Before surgery, before she was in a fog of existential questions, Robyn had asked her doctor to send pictures of the joint they were replacing. Which had deteriorated so badly it looked like a peach. As delicious as peaches are, especially this time of year, our bones should not look like peaches. So Robyn is thankful for a brand new, inedible titanium hip!

Jacob may well have felt as if he had a peach pit for a hip bone as he limped away from Peniel at dawn in the story we heard today. Jacob would likely have appreciated having a titanium hip in the fierce struggle with the ambiguous stranger -- though I'm not sure it would have mattered.

Jacob is no stranger to the struggle. A couple of weeks ago, we heard the beginning of Jacob's story: the birth of Jacob, grasping the heel of his twin brother, Esau, who was born first, and the birth of the strained relationship that grew between the two disparate brothers. Do you remember a famished Esau, coming in from the fields, impulsively selling his birthright to Jacob for a pot of *stew*?

Later, Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, trick Jacob's father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the blessing intended for Esau as eldest brother. Esau threatens to kill Jacob, and Jacob flees Canaan for the land of Rebekah's brother, Laban, where he marries two of Laban's

daughters -- Leah, then Rachel. (You know that ideal biblical model of marriage: a union between a man and multiple first cousins.) After several years, and children, God tells Jacob to go back to Canaan, the land of his ancestors and kindred.

Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, *You Can't Go Home Again*. But that is what Jacob is on his way to do this eventful eve. He was probably destined to not get much sleep.

Jacob had already sent messengers to Esau, to let him know that Jacob was coming and hoped to find favour in his sight. The messengers return with an update: Esau is on his way to meet Jacob, with 400 men.

Jacob is terrified. He sends messengers with extravagant gifts of livestock to appease Esau. He sends his family -- his wives and children -- and everything he owns ahead of him. Then, we read, *Jacob was left alone*. But not for long. His loneliness lasts only until the following semicolon -- not even a separate sentence -- when an unnamed stranger wrestles with him until daybreak.

This story has probably been read and interpreted as much as any in the Hebrew scriptures, and it remains as equivocal as any. It is hard to know exactly what we see in the dark and twilight hours.

Earlier in the Genesis account, when God tells Jacob to go back home, God promises to be with Jacob. And since then, Jacob has cried out to God in distress, asking for deliverance. So it should come as no surprise that a messenger of God appears. But why does this messenger wrestle with Jacob? And why can't he prevail against, escape from, Jacob?

We are not told how the wrestling match begins. I wonder... did this messenger of God come to speak words of comfort, to be a presence of solidarity, to let Jacob know he would not make the return journey to Canaan alone, but Jacob, consumed by his fears and anxieties, perceives the messenger as a threat, assumes ill will, and responds with self-defense? George Bailey is pretty cynical about Clarence at the beginning of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Or did God, through this messenger, initiate the physical encounter? Does God wish to grapple with Jacob and be grappled with -- to reshape Jacob's despairing understanding of himself, of relationship and what it means to be kindred, in this fierce and intimate struggle?

The overnight encounter reflects the way Jacob has contended with those closest to him all his life. And so the messenger gives Jacob a new name -- *Israel* -- meaning "God strives" or, as it is interpreted here, "One who strives with God." The name itself reflects the ambiguity of the encounter.

However it began, we know -- sort of -- how the embattled embrace ends, another familiar theme for Jacob: with blessing. But this time it is not a blessing intended for someone else; it is not a blessing received by manipulation or trickery, but by unwavering resolve to hang on.

And with words or touch to which we are not witness, the messenger of God blesses Jacob. Luckily, since the blessing cannot be memorialized by the powers of social media, Jacob is left with a limp to remind him of the divine encounter, lest he forget or be tempted to think he has imagined the whole extraordinary event. Lest he begin to believe he could lose this blessing, that it -- that God -- could let go of him.

When I visited Robyn at home last Thursday, recovering from and with her new hip, she told me a story about a mythical family tradition from her childhood: Her grandmother had a plant that bloomed once a year, late at night. One special night a year the petals opened up -- releasing a fragrance that filled the whole house, Robyn said -- lasting only a few gorgeous hours before withering away. Family members who were not awake or around doubted the mysterious occurrence.

So Robyn and her grandmother tried to think of ways to make the bloom last longer: One year they put the plant in the freezer, hoping that might preserve it. One year they put it upside down in flour (I'm actually not sure how this was supposed to help -- I think they were getting desperate, and maybe delusional in the early morning hours).

In any case, no matter what they tried, after a few hours, the mid-night miracle remained only in their memories and the imaginations of family members who often doubted.

Our stories today, from the book of Genesis and from the Gospel of Matthew, are marked by inexplicable miracles in the evening hours.

The feeding of the multitude, read by Marselline this morning, is the only miracle story in all four gospels, and one of the most well-known narratives in the New Testament: the disciples claiming they have no food for the crowds, who have followed Jesus, the compassionate healer, to this deserted place. Jesus blessing and breaking the five loaves of bread and sending them out with the disciples. And somehow *all ate and were filled*, with baskets to spare.

To the psalmist's question "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" (Psalm 78:17), this scene seems to say emphatically, miraculously, "Yes."

Listeners have long wondered how exactly it happened:

1. Some believe it was a textbook miracle surpassing known natural and scientific laws.
2. Some believe that the disciples offering what little food they had -- after being voluntold by Jesus, I mean -- inspired others to dig out of their pockets and bags the morsels they brought, and extend to those around: the miracle of mass sharing.
3. Some envision a Communion-like moment: with folks taking and passing small pieces. It was not their stomachs that were filled, but their spirits. It was a blessing they could touch, a tangible reminder that *blessed are they*.

We can imagine the miracle in different ways, even concurrently. Which is perhaps part of what makes it so marvelous.

Today, as we hear the stories of Jacob and the hungry multitude, let us pause -- close our eyes if we'd like -- and remember the fears and anxieties that tell us we are undeserving, we are not enough, we are too much or too little, we are alone; all the voices and memories that leave us feeling empty.

Now hear the One who comes in our most shadowy hours to the places we have isolated ourselves, and extends to us this Welcome Table: *You, my beloved, are blessed. You belong here.*