# *WHEN WE FIND OURSELVES WRESTLING WITH FEAR*

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on August 6, 2023*

*based upon Genesis 32:22-31*

In her wonderful book about the writing life*, Bird by Bird,* Anne Lamott tells the following story:

Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”

Life can so easily overwhelm. Our first great task in life is not to prevail but simply to cope – to get to a place where you can reason wisely. It takes a lot of courage to be a human being.

I remember holding my daughter, Margaret, for the first time. I had been programmed to think newborns didn’t open their eyes and hers were wide taking in the world from the first moment. Very curious, those sea colored baby eyes had no hint of fear, no hint of knowing what would be required of her. Like all babies she ate, she slept, she sighed when she was full.

The world was only as wide as our apartment and safe as her mother’s arms.

For most babies that is the way. But then education begins. I remember what it felt like to learn that bees sting and roses come with thorns, that children push you and sometimes throw rocks.

I remember discovering nausea for the first time and I remember too well that when your parents decide it’s time to move to another city there is nothing you can do about it.

All of that was part of growing up. But year after year we add to our experience of the world.

Throwing our little weight around, finding what will budge and what will not and gradually gaining a sense of our own power.

We find out how powerful the words *yes* and *no* are, and are not, and with whom.

Some of us get so carried away with this that we come to think we can actually control our own lives.

We come of age and decide what to be when we grow up, or what to be first.

We get credit cards and mortgages. We take supplements, we work out, we space our children 2 or three years apart. And seven times out of ten things work.

We have taken charge of our lives. We have learned to live intentionally,

and living intentionally may be enough, . . . until something really dramatic happens; something unintentional -- something that blindsides us like a divorce or a pandemic;

a downsizing or a diagnosis.

It’s like a recurring dream a friend of mine has had most of her life where she gets in the back seat of a car and it takes off with only her in it.

It fills her with panic. “ I’ve lost control,” we say, but it isn’t true at all. Because as we all know, we human beings do not control our lives

I’ve said it myself, but when things careen out of control what we lose is *the illusion* that we’ve lost control, because we’ve never been in control in the first place.

And it is a hard lesson to learn, so hard because we go back and back to the blackboard thinking there must be some way we can work it out.

And this is not a bad impulse because some times we can, but not always and that is what galls us.

We want to live in a world with no leaks, no scars, no black holes, but somehow we wound up on earth where everything is so fragile. The war in Ukraine goes on and on.

The planet is warming faster than anyone expected. They have to take corral out of the ocean in Florida and put it in cool water in people’s bathtubs to keep it alive.

This world will break your heart. It seems to do it just about every week, now. Someone once said, “That’s why it is called the human *condition*. It’s like asthma, or myopia. It’s a condition we live with.

Life is mostly terrific but it has certain built-in short-comings. Some rocks will budge and some will not. We cannot fly, none of us will live forever. We cannot choose all the circumstances of our life.

Even when we take months or years to make huge decisions about who to live with for the rest of our lives – we find there are so many surprises, things we didn’t count on.

What happened??

We cannot choose these things, we can only choose how to respond to them. The Bible is full to bursting with this.

This morning we heard a story from the life of Jacob who is such an operator in life. As a young man he’s always massaging everything and manipulating every one. Then he spends his entire adult life running away from his brother Esau who he’d swindled big time long before. Esau had said he would kill Jacob, and finally Jacob decides it’s time to stop running – he just gets to a place where he can run no further.

I love Rabbi Harold Kushner’s reflections on Jacob. He says, "My favorite prayer in the Bible is the one Jacob offers just before wrestling with the angel in the book of Genesis. He's at the same river bank where as a teenager he had prayed a very immature prayer: 'Keep me safe, make me rich, and I will thank you and worship you like crazy.'

Now 20 years later he comes back much more mature. There's no bargaining; there's no Santa Claus list. His prayer is simply: 'I have to do something hard; I know it's right and I'm not sure I can do it. If you help me, maybe I can do it. If you leave me on my own, I know I'll fall on my face the way I have every other time I've tried to do this.'

For me, that's prayer," says Kushner. "It doesn't change the world. Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau who has said, 'The next time I meet you I'm going to kill you.' Jacob doesn't ask God to turn Esau into a pussycat. He doesn't ask God to strike Esau with amnesia so he'll forget his anger. Rather, Jacob says to God: 'I've spent my whole life running from confrontation. I'm tired of running. Help me face up to this and get through this crisis." Kushner says with confidence, "That's prayer: Don't change the world [God]. Don't take away my problems. Don't make my road smooth. But give me the grace to walk it, no matter how rocky it is." (in Questions of Faith p. 14)

Jacob finds out something a lot of people find out when they get to about age 40.

He thinks he’s been wrestling with other people all those years when, in fact,

all along he has actually been wrestling with himself.

We get inklings of that all our life. The lucky ones finally find the power and the courage to face that. But it’s scary.

Joseph Campbellonce said, "It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for."

If the story of Jacob is to be fully taken in, facing our fear is not just an act of courage we chalk up to as virtuous. It can also lead to a blessing.

Rachel Naomi Remen wrote a whole book on the subject of blessing once.

It’s about her Jewish grandfather –

*Almost the last story that my grandfather told me was about a man called Jacob who had been attacked in the night as he slept alone by the bank of a river. He had been traveling, and when he had stopped to make his meal and settle down to sleep, the place had seemed safe enough. But it was not so. He awakened to find himself gripped by muscular arms and pinned to the ground. It was so dark that he could not see his enemy, but he could feel his power. Gathering all his strength, he began to struggle to be free.*

*‘How long did they struggle, Grandpa?’ I asked with some anxiety. ‘A long, long time,’ he replied, ‘but the darkness does not last forever. Eventually it was dawn and as the light came, Jacob saw that he had been wrestling with an angel.’*

*With the coming of the light, the angel let go of Jacob and tried to leave, but Jacob held him fast. ‘Let me go,' the angel told Jacob, ‘The Light has come.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go until you bless me.’ The angel struggled hard, for he wanted badly to escape, but Jacob held him close. And so the angel gave him his blessing.’*

*I was very relieved. ‘Did he leave then, Grandpa? Is that the end?’ I asked. ‘Yes,’ my grandfather said, ‘but Jacob’s leg was hurt in the struggle. Before the angel left, he touched him on the place where he was hurt.’ This was something I could understand; often my mother did this, too. ‘To help it get better, Grandpa?' I asked. But my grandfather shook his head. ‘I do not think so, darling child. He touched it to remind Jacob of it. Jacob carried it all the rest of his life. It was his place of remembering.’*

*I was very puzzled by this story. How could it be that one might confuse an angel with an enemy? But Grandfather said this was the sort of thing that happened all the time. ‘Even so,’ he told me, ‘it is not the most important part of the story. The most important part of the story is that everything has its blessing.*

*How tempting to let the enemy go and flee. To put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life.*

*Life might be easier then but far less genuine. Perhaps the wisdom lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing in everything.*

There is a passage from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans appointed for today that reads, “You have not been given the spirit of God to fall back into fear.” Fear is a chronic problem. You think you’ve gotten over it and it pops up again, like grief or a nagging habit. Still, we can deal with it, and it can get easier as you go along.

In her book, "When Things Fall Apart," Pema Chodron speaks of how we get cornered by life from time to time. Fear does it, she says.

*So, the next time you encounter fear, consider yourself lucky. This is where the courage comes in. Usually we think that brave people have no fear. When I was first married my husband said I was one of the bravest people he knew. When I asked him why, he said because I was a complete coward but went ahead and did things anyhow.*

*The trick is to keep exploring and not bail out, even when we find that something is not what we thought. That's what we're going to discover again and again and again. Nothing is what we thought. I can say that with complete confidence. Emptiness is not what we thought. . . . Fear. Compassion? -- not what we thought. Love. Courage. These are code words for things we don't know in our minds, but any of us could experience them. These are words that point to what life really is when we let things fall apart and let ourselves be nailed to the present moment.*

Amen