

To facilitate group discussion, Public Affairs Television, Inc. has created the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.

Below is an excerpt from the chapter "God Wrestling". In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide asks whether Jacob and Esau are ever truly reconciled.

GOD WRESTLING

THE STORY OF JACOB'S COMING-OF-AGE: GENESIS 28, 32-33

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (Genesis 32:25, The Jewish Publication Society Torah)

Now read the story of Jacob's journey in your Bible. (If you would like to read the entire story of Jacob's journey, read Genesis 27-35.) As you do, consider the following questions:

- Who does Jacob struggle with in the night? God? An angel? Esau? Himself?
- Is there a genuine reconciliation between the brothers? Did each undergo a transformation while apart? How did each change?
- Why does Jacob encounter God at these particular moments in his life? Would any of the encounters have been possible for Jacob earlier? At what point does Jacob really seem to come of age?
- Why do Jacob's encounters with God take place at night? How does what happens at night differ in texture and quality from what happens during the daytime?
- Do you wrestle with God? With other people? With yourself?

THE STRUGGLE TOWARD RECONCILIATION

by Walter Brueggemann

Jacob is on the most dangerous mission of his life. He is about to meet his brother Esau, the one whom he had deeply wronged. Since before he was married, Jacob had done great damage to his family, and now he is on his way home, profoundly frightened--and with good reason! He has no ground for imagining that his "brother's fury" (Genesis 27:44) has been assuaged.

Jacob is a careful and prudent man. In his fearfulness, he plans and manages to prepare himself for this dangerous meeting. He uses his daytime energy to put himself in the most advantageous position he can. He sends messengers to his brother to prepare the way (32:3-5). He prays to enlist God's aid, reminding God of all promises to him still to be kept (32:9-12). He sends a series of messengers with a series of gifts to make a good appearance (32:13-20). He is utterly preoccupied and consumed with this meeting: "For he thought, I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me" (32:21). While it is not evident from the translation, this single verse includes a wordplay on "face"; it is used in Hebrew five times with widely varying meanings.

But then, as happens to all of us, night comes upon Jacob and with it fatigue, exhaustion, some rest, and a great deal of restlessness. Jacob wishes for rest from his daytime work of arranging his reunion with his brother. On this night, however, he receives no rest. We are not told what kind of encounter he has--perhaps dream, perhaps nightmare. Whatever it is, it is intense, demanding, strenuous "nighttime work." Unlike his daytime work, this restless nighttime assignment is to enter into the deep unresolve that preoccupies his life. During the day, he is able to manage and take initiative. But at night, as for all of us, Jacob turns out to be vulnerable, and things rush powerfully beyond his control. His night is peopled by

those uninvited and unwelcome in his life. But they are the very ones with whom he has to come to terms, if he is to go home peaceably.

This enigmatic report of his strenuous night leaves us with two great imponderables. First, it is not clear who Jacob meets in the night. That, of course, is how it is in the night. Things are unclear, and characters merge, confuse, and remain unstable. There is no doubt, on the one hand, that the character who assaults him is God. At the end, Jacob asserts, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (v. 30). The wrestler has the inscrutable power of holiness hidden; he is enigmatic and elusive. On the other hand, we are told that "a man wrestled with him," i.e., a human agent, not God. When we consider who "a man" might be, the best candidate is Esau, who haunts Jacob's night as he does his day. Thus the wrestling is a "working through" of his deep anxiety about his brother.

The outcome of the wrestling is "You have striven with God and with man, and you have prevailed" (v. 28). In the daytime, we would ask, "Now which is it, God or man?" But at night things are not sorted out. There is in this meeting a convergence of the ominousness of holiness and the dreadfulness of brother. That, of course, is how it is in the night. We never get God alone, without all the complexities and unresolve of the neighborhood. And we never get wronged brother alone, without the threatening face of God. The narrator understands (as Freud belatedly understood) that the hidden powers of conflict and the hidden chance of resolve occur at night, beyond our intent. There is something of the divine in our deep human conflict and something of humanness in the holiness of God, for at night heaven and earth come at us jointly and redefine us in radical ways.

The second elusive quality in this narrative is that one cannot be sure if the "partner" in wrestling is only adversary or also advocate. The adversarial quality is unmistakable. Jacob is assaulted, evoking his deep deserved anxiety. As a consequence, he is wounded and left with a permanent visible limp. We may take this as God's judgment or as Esau's revenge. But the meeting is not all adversarial. This stranger in the night gives Jacob a new name: "Israel." Jacob finishes his night with a radically new identity, one that opens the future for his people. That ambiguous quality is how it is in the night, when we are vulnerable and not in control. In the daytime, we can distinguish between adversaries and advocates. But at night, nothing is clear, and nobody is to be trusted excessively. For the night leaves us haunted by partners who themselves give mixed and unclear messages. By engaging his anxieties, Jacob is wounded. By not flinching in the dark, he wins through to a blessing, even from an enemy who had not intended to grant a blessing.

Important things happen that night. Jacob does not overcome all of his dread, for such nighttime work is not easily transformative. He is, however, free now to meet his brother. The meeting turns out better than he anticipated: The brother he meets is more kindly disposed than the brother he had conjured. And Jacob can remember the night long enough to assert the odd mix of identities: "For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God--since you have received me with such favor" (33:10; on "face," see 32:21).

Of course, our life of faith is like that. Biblical faith offers no God who is not embedded in the fabric of human transactions. Thus estranged brotherliness leads to estrangement from God. Reconciled brotherliness, moreover, leads to reconciliation with God.

This narrative haunts us because we are tempted to remain daytime people, knowing and in control. The story bears witness that the crucial transformations in our identity and our faith happen at night, when we are vulnerable recipients. In the darkness comes the "sibling God" who is adversary/advocate, in order to redefine us and leave us blessed and wounded, the only triumph possible in the face of God and brother. Walter Brueggemann, a series participant, teaches Old Testament at the Columbia Theological Seminary and is the author of *The Psalms* and *The Life of Faith*.

ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

TRACKING OUR JOURNEY (PART 1): JOURNEYS OF THE SPIRIT

"Spiritual journey" may sound like New Age jargon, but the truth is that journeys of the spirit are as old as humankind--and the Bible is the repository of the accounts of some of the greatest spiritual journeys men and women have ever taken. While we may not have thought of our own lives as journeys of the

spirit, we are all, to one degree or another, searching: Jacob's dark night of the soul, when he wrestles either God or a man and prevails, is not unfamiliar to us; it is a vivid dramatization of what, for most of us, happens with less fanfare, more gradually, and entirely within ourselves. To begin a discussion, have group members bring one or two objects that they feel symbolize their journeys to your next meeting and go around the circle, asking each person to tell the group about his/her objects and their significance.

From the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.