

Sunday, July 31, 2011: Genesis 32:22-31

Even a painful cheap shot cannot shake Jacob's resolve.

by [Shawnthea Monroe](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

What superpower would you like to have?" my son asked as we were driving away from the local cinema multiplex. With all the superhero movies we've seen this summer, I wasn't surprised by the question. "I'd like to be invisible," said his sister. "Flying would be cooler," he responded, and so the debate began. All the way home, they argued about the merits of flight versus invisibility, telepathy versus magic, laser vision versus X-ray vision. Eventually they agreed that it didn't matter if the power was cool; the point was to pick a power that made life easier.

"Which power would you choose, Mom?"

I thought for a moment and replied, "Perseverance."

"That's not a superpower!" They laughed and went back to ignoring me.

It may be true that perseverance is not a superpower in the classical sense, but it's a human characteristic that's in short supply these days. There's not much call for perseverance, tenacity or endurance. If something isn't working—with our jobs, with our relationships, with our possessions—we give up and move on. That's why the story of Jacob wrestling at Peniel is so countercultural—and such good news.

Jacob was in a real bind. He was a rogue and a liar who'd spent his life cutting corners, gaming the system and running away. Now there was nowhere to run. God had called him back from Haran, saying, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you" (Gen. 31:3). But as night descended in the wilderness, Jacob had only his fear for company, and there was a lot to fear.

When Jacob had last seen his brother Esau, the cheated man was breathing violence and plotting Jacob's demise. If his brother continued to rage against him, Jacob could lose everything: his property, his family and his life. In hopes of softening his

brother's mood, Jacob had sent generous gifts in advance. Yet how many head of livestock could compensate a man for a lost birthright and blessing? Alone in the dark, Jacob feared what the coming day would bring.

Then night fell and God showed up as promised.

"And a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Scripture doesn't begin to capture the raw physicality of the scene. Imagine the grappling, the struggling, the straining and the sweating as two powerful figures attempt to subdue one another through brute force. This is no ethereal angelic vision; this is flesh against flesh. There are no words until the sky begins to lighten. Seeing that he cannot defeat Jacob if he continues to play by the rules, the holy stranger deals Jacob a crippling blow to the hip socket. Yet even this painful cheap shot cannot shake Jacob's resolve: he just hangs on.

Exhausted and spent, the stranger speaks, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob, who suspects that he has his hands on the Lord, demands a blessing. God gives him a new name: Israel, the one who has "striven with God and with humans and has prevailed." Now Jacob is sure that this is the Lord, and in fear and trembling he asks to know his name. God replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" Then, as suddenly as it began, the encounter is over. "And there he blessed him."

So what was the blessing? Was it the new name or the new self-understanding the name represented? I don't think it was the name. Jacob became Israel not in the moment God declared it so, but over the course of a night spent struggling with the Lord. Up to that point, he'd always had some trick up his sleeve, some angle he was working. Jacob had made fools of Isaac, Esau and Laban, which is how he'd gotten into this mess. But Jacob couldn't fool God. By human standards, Jacob was charming, clever and cunning, but his true power was revealed when fear stripped him of all pretense and all he had to hold on to was God. The experience was the blessing, the experience of persevering despite the cost.

When I think of people who have persevered through exceptionally hard times, I remember a woman whose marriage had survived her husband's series of affairs. She told of discovering the betrayals and of all the rage and fear and sorrow and guilt that followed. Instead of giving up, she and her husband held on through painful marriage counseling and a slow rebuilding of trust. Years later, they seemed like the perfect couple, two people in a loving relationship that was a model of

mutual care and understanding. I was in awe as I listened to her. "How did you get ever past the pain?" I asked. "I didn't," she said. "The scars are still there, but that's OK. They remind me of how strong this relationship really is and what we've been through."

Jacob never got past the pain either. For the rest of his life, he limped as proof of the high cost of holding on to God. But that may have been part of the blessing.

When this country goes through hard times, we flock to movies about superheroes and their otherworldly adventures. But instead of dreaming about powers we will never have, we might do better if we just learn to persevere. In the dark of night, when fear and despair threaten to rob us of all hope, we should, like Jacob, hold on to God, even if it causes us pain. Learning to persevere through the worst of times: that's a blessing better than any superpower.