

August 2, Ordinary 18A (Genesis 32:22–31)

Those of us who wrestle with God have no guarantee that things will turn out well.

by [Liz Cooledge Jenkins](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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The divine stranger finds Jacob in an in-between time. For Jacob, it is a time of great uncertainty. A time of great fear, perhaps—and for some very good reasons. After many years away, Jacob has finally come near to the land where his brother Esau lives. The last time Jacob heard from Esau, Esau intended to kill him (Gen. 27:41). Now, many years later, Jacob sends Esau messengers with a conciliatory offering (32:3–5), and he hears that Esau is coming to meet him—accompanied by at least 400 men (32:6). Terrifying.

Does Esau approach with a face of gracious reconciliation or of vicious retribution? Jacob has no way of knowing. The coin is up in the air, spinning, and could easily land on either side. If Esau wanted to, he could cause serious damage to Jacob’s family, animals, and possessions. He could cost Jacob his life.

As night falls, Jacob has already done what he can do. He sent messengers with gifts; he prayed (32:9–12); he strategized (32:13–21). And now there is nothing left to do but wait, not knowing whether he will survive the next day. We might relate to this feeling of in-betweenness. We might think of uncertain relationships, or of fear-inducing political situations. This is where the divine stranger meets Jacob; perhaps it’s where the Divine meets us, too.

As Jacob waits to learn whether Esau has had a change of heart or is still hell-bent on revenge, he does so alone. He sends everyone away. Biblical scholar and Episcopal priest Wilda Gafney notes that when the divine stranger asks Jacob’s name, “Jacob answers with no ancestors, clan or people.” This is telling, says Gafney. What is his family now? Jacob is unsure. He exists in a state of disconnection. Perhaps of self-perceived independence, not able to trust or rely on anyone but himself.

After all, from grabbing his brother’s heel in the womb (25:24–26) to having to flee Esau’s rage to being tricked by Laban into marrying Leah before Rachel (29:21–25), Jacob’s relationships have been full of conflict since birth. He may feel that he has had to grapple for everything he’s received. Relationships with other people have never come easy. And maybe now, more than ever, awaiting possible reconciliation or a possible death sentence, he feels utterly alone.

We might relate to Jacob in the times when we’re waiting on something that feels like a coin flip—or perhaps carries worse odds than that. We wait for medical test results for ourselves or a loved one. We wait to hear back about a possible job offer after yet another interview. We wait on immigration proceedings, on the court system. We seek peace while watching news of war. We seek climate action and wait to see if Earth can still heal. We wait to see if reconciliation is possible, if health is possible, if psychological wholeness can be found.

In times like these, we might find ourselves, like Jacob, wrestling with God through the night, feeling utterly alone. Struggling with a divine stranger. Perhaps unsure exactly who or what we’re grappling with and whether good or evil will come of it—yet, like Jacob, desperate for something that feels like a blessing, a reassurance that we will be OK.

I wish we could hear the blessing Jacob demands—and receives—from the divine stranger. “There he blessed him,” the text reads. The specifics are left up to our imagination. We don’t know what was said. We do know that Esau arrives shortly after, and that—perhaps against all odds—he runs out to meet Jacob, gives him a big bear hug, and both men break down weeping (33:4). Jacob’s prayer for deliverance is answered. His hopes for reconciliation—and for his own life to be spared—are met.

Those of us who wrestle with God in our own lonely, in-between places have no guarantee that things will turn out well. We are not promised success, healing, reconciliation, justice, or peace. But maybe in the process of wrestling—with God, with our fears and anxieties, with our lack of control, with our vulnerability, with our mistakes and their possible consequences, with our mortality—we find transformation.

Maybe we, like Jacob, are given a new name. At the end of that long night, he is no longer Jacob—the heel-grabber, always striving, always insecure, always grasping, always needing more. He is Israel—“God prevails.” Perhaps his new name reflects a new awareness of God’s power and presence; perhaps he no longer feels that he has to struggle against everyone for everything. Perhaps he no longer feels alone.

In the things we long for, wait for, or feel deeply uncertain about, maybe we, too, meet the Divine. Maybe we, too, are changed by our wrestling. And maybe we find that this is enough.