

## 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“All Star Wrestling”

6 August 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Genesis 32:22-31

**The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."**

**But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (Genesis 32:22-31).**

Plainly our “hero” Jacob is a conflicted person. First Jacob had shrewdly tricked his elder brother Esau out of his birthright. In ancient times, the birthright is the portion of inheritance that goes to the firstborn son. Today we likely divide family inheritances in more equitable ways. Yet, the birthright in biblical times was an important feature of family life. The birthright represented security, prosperity, fertility, and land. Who was to blame in the trickery? We could make the case that Jacob surely took advantage of his elder brother (by a few minutes). As the text reminds us, “Esau came in from the field, and he was famished” (Genesis 25:29). But, as in most cases of conflict, there was enough blame to go around. We also know from the biblical account that, “Esau despised his birthright” (Genesis 25:34). The boys’ shame, however, gives us an excellent and delightful story.

Not only did Jacob snatch Esau’s birthright, but he also tricked their father Isaac out of the blessing a patriarch gives the eldest son. Thus, Jacob had not only produced an enemy in his brother, but Jacob deceived his own father. This is when Rebekah whisked Jacob to her brother’s house—all because of Esau’s threat of violence.

Jacob’s itinerary continues with abundant evidence of conflict. In the Jacob story, he and his uncle Laban match wits in a win-lose scenario for years. Finally, after absconding with several of Laban’s daughters, who also happened to be Jacob’s wives, Jacob breaks for home and faces the troubles that await him there. Jacob also takes

with him much wealth he has stealthily accumulated at his father-in-law's expense. In due course, Jacob and Laban cut a covenant, but it is more of a truce than it is a resolution. While it is a beautiful benediction, listen to the words, knowing that first-rate schemers make the pledge. "*The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other*" (Genesis 31:49). Need I say more?

Finally, Jacob is on his way home. But what kind of reception will he get? In a prayer directly preceding our text, Jacob prays: "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children" (Genesis 32:11). Was it a shrewd tactic to send the women and children in front of him to meet what may come, or, did Jacob simply need some time alone? The text leaves this tantalizing and ambiguous question for the reader to answer. But there Jacob is alone the night before he will presumably have to face the music that his brother will make. Remember the last words he heard from his mother related Esau's threats of death ringing in his ears. What a family!

The story of Jacob wrestling "the man" (or an angel or God or even himself—the text is infamously ambiguous on this point) suggests that Jacob is finally ready to own up to his responsibility for his previous actions. He is, so it seems, finally resolved to bear the consequences of his previous behavior.

This is one of the Bible's archetypal stories of struggle—and Jacob was no stranger to struggle and conflict. On one level, this is a story of the human struggle with God. On another level, it is a story about a person's struggle with himself. Yet, what emerges from the story is the reality that, even during our struggles with God and self, the most enduring word is a word of God's grace. In the end, the "man" (or whatever) blesses Jacob and bestows upon him a new name.

Let us highlight two important features from this story. First, Jacob gets a new name in his encounter with the "man" with whom he wrestles. The name "Jacob" means "he who supplants" or "he who takes by the heel." We know from all the stories of Jacob that the description "heel" is one that plainly fits his character and personality. Now, however, the nocturnal visitor gives him a new name "Israel." This name means "one who strives with God and people and yet prevails." Like Cephas who becomes Peter, or Saul who becomes Paul, the name change reveals an alteration in character and destiny. Just think, even now, a whole nation bears this venerated name "Israel."

Second, the man with whom Jacob wrestles wounds Jacob and puts his hip out of joint. Jacob now not only has a new name from the experience, but he also has a new walk—he will limp for the rest of his life. Yet, Jacob will never forget that night by the ford of the river Jabbok. The story concludes: “*The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.*”

This is one of the grandly momentous stories from Hebrew scripture/OT. One thing the story suggests is that God continues to struggle with us no matter how much we fight back. No matter our unrighteousness, our God continues to be faithful to the divine promises. Perhaps, the struggle between God and human beings exists because God granted us the free will to struggle. Thus, no matter our obstinacy, we worship a God who is, as the great hymn writer George Matheson described a “Love that wilt not let me go” (*The UM Hymnal*, # 480).

Those who struggle with God and themselves do so with the holiness, wonder, and power of God. This struggle leads to deeper self-awareness, but that self-awareness comes at the price of pain, to be sure. Many people skate through life seeking pleasure while avoiding pain. Yet in this particular struggle’s pain, we come to a knowledge of who we are—and perhaps even a dash of who God is. To endure the pain of self-awareness is to more fully understand who we are and why God created us in the first place. So . . . the next time you struggle with yourself or with God, remember this—You are in good company! Amen.

[Some material taken to shape this sermon came from *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A*, Brueggemann, Cousar, et. al. and *Preaching Genesis 12—36*, by A. Carter Shelley]

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