

Hold On

Genesis 32:22-32

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 9 and 10:45 a.m.

We were at a Mexican Restaurant this last Tuesday night. I noticed an exhausted family of tourists standing by the machine that makes the tortillas. The hostess noticed that the kids were fascinated and so she came out with two dough balls for them to play with. She handed one of the balls to the five-year-old sister. Faster than a frog zapping a fly, the three year-old little brother grabbed it out of her hand. He couldn't wait to see if the hostess had something for him as well. He saw what he wanted and he took it.

I was instantly reminded of Jacob. Jacob took what he wanted when he wanted it. As you remember from past sermons in this series, Jacob was grabbing stuff before he was born...he grabbed Esau in the womb, grabbed Esau's heel as they were being born...grabbed the birthright and then the blessing. Then, as they say, he had to get outta Dodge fast. While he was on the way to his Uncle Laban's home, God showed up and blessed him. God promised him an abundant future and blessed him with his presence. It's been twenty years since that vision of heaven. What's happened to him? How will God show up again in his life and what will that mean? Let us pray.

Lord God, our lives often feel like you are far away. Through your Word and by your Spirit, may we hear your voice and know that you are with us, no matter where we find ourselves. Amen.

As we read the story of Jacob as it unfolds in Genesis, we become very aware that Jacob was a man who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. He did not wait for his destiny to unfold...he made it happen. But the things he grabbed were really ticking time bombs. As he edged his brother Esau out of his inheritance, he also created an enemy that would haunt him for decades. He's been able to keep Esau's revenge in the back of his mind as he has built a fortune and grown a family, but now, the voice of God has come to him and told him that it's time to go home. And home is where Esau lives.

It is at this point in the story that we know that the Jacob who is heading home is very different from the Jacob who ran away. First of all, he actually does what god says. He doesn't try to avoid it. When he ran away from home, he had to leave because of his deceit. He left because his mother told him to and he left because there was a price on his head. And he left with just the clothes he was wearing.

Now he is returning home, but this time, he is the victim of his uncle's deceit – remember that little thing with Leah and Rachel? He's making this trip because God told him to and he is returning with great wealth and a huge family. And – and this is the important thing – he went even though he knew that Esau probably still wanted to kill him.

Now, here is how we know Jacob is different: After he sets out for home, Laban thinks that Jacob has stolen from him and chases after him. Jacob still obeys the voice of God telling him to go home, even though it would be to his advantage to just stay put. He then finds out that Esau is coming towards him with an army of four hundred. That doesn't sound like a caterer coming with a "Welcome Home" buffet, does it? Squeezed between two adversaries, he heads into a risky future. Why? For what most people consider the craziest of reasons – God told him to.

Well, first things first. Jacob negotiates a tenuous truce with Laban. One enemy defused. The only adversary he sees on the horizon now is Esau, so he does everything he can think of to avoid a fate worse than...well, actually, the fate is death. He divides up his whole company so that if one part is attacked, perhaps the other will survive. He prays – he acknowledges that all he has is God's gift to him. And he reminds God of the promise He had made.

Then, he sends out wave after wave of gifts to Esau. This is probably to show Esau that he is independently wealthy and does not need to grab for anymore of Esau's property. He's letting Esau know that what belongs to Esau stays with Esau.

He's done all he can do to protect himself, his family and his assets. Now, as we meet him in today's story, he is alone in a river gorge filled with wildlife that would make anyone long for the comforts of a Motel 6. He is alone. Both running away from home and returning, Jacob will meet God alone...in the dark. In the Bible, darkness represents turbulence, threat, loneliness and fear. Jacob is alone in the dark. This is the stuff of horror movies. I don't want to be where Jacob is at this moment.

Without any warning, Jacob immediately is in a real fight. This is not just a dark night of the soul. This is dark-night-of-the-soul-PLUS. This was not the fight, the struggle he had anticipated, but this was the one he got. We can only imagine what he might have been thinking – you know—those kinds of thoughts that race through your mind at a thousand miles an hour when something frightening is happening... Has Esau sent just a single assassin? Is this Esau himself? I didn't think of that...I sent everyone away Should I have kept a couple of guards? Just one more person and we could beat this guy. Who is this guy? They will go at it all night. Jacob holds on to this unknown assailant no matter what, even when his hip is painfully dislocated – think sciatica. It's getting close to dawn and Jacob, injured and exhausted, still holds on. Finally, the adversary asks Jacob to let go. Jacob will not, but he's beginning to think that this wrestler may be more than a mere human. In asking for a blessing, Jacob begins to realize that his adversary is someone who can actually give a blessing.

As light is beginning to creep over the horizon, Jacob says he won't let go unless he is given a blessing. What's the response? It's a question and a strange one at that – “What's your name?” But it's not really so strange. The Wrestler is making Jacob confront himself. “Who are you? What's your name? You lied about your name once. You wanted your father to think you were someone else, remember?”

Now, Jacob has to tell the truth about himself – in saying his name out loud, he is saying: It's me Jacob – the schemer, the supplanter, the deceiver. When he does that, the blessing comes. He is given a new name – Israel – a name that transforms and redeems him. It is a name that tells him how God sees him. God sees Jacob as the one who will wrestle with him. For you see, it is at this point that it becomes clear that Jacob has been wrestling with none other than God.

You know, by the time you get to this point in the story, you realize that all of Jacob's struggles have been a postponement of The Struggle. He's been wrestling with his brother, with his father and with his uncle...his father-in-law...to get what he thinks a blessing is. A blessing is getting your father's approval. It's getting your hands on wealth...it's getting the right relationship...it's making sure that the chickens don't come home to roost. How'd that work for him?

Let's count the ways: He's had to leave the mother he loves and he's estranged from his dad. His brother wants to kill him and his wives won't stop pulling him every which way out of jealousy and possessiveness. His father-in-law thinks he's a crook and would throw him under the jail. And now Jacob is alone with nothing but his fears and doubts. That's how trying to make the blessing come has worked out. And now this huge wrestling match...

People often talk about wrestling with God and if you ask them what the fight's about, they'll say that they've got some tough issues in their lives that need to be resolved...they've got questions about God that need to be answered...there are big needs that just have to get filled. Well, those are all things that we deal with, but that's not what this is about. This is not about wrestling with God to get something from God.

I think the most important thing in this whole story is this – Jacob didn't go looking for God so that he could wrestle with him. Jacob has certainly gotten his affairs in order, but he didn't clear his desk and his calendar so that he could call God out, saying “Bring it on!”

No, this was the last thing he wanted. His recent actions seem to say that he's done with all this struggling. He has no stomach for it anymore. But now, God comes looking for him. What does God want out of this match? God wants Jacob to know himself and to know that God is with him unconditionally. Jacob cannot

be dishonest about himself and expect blessing from the God of Truth. That's one of the reasons why we confess our sin before we come to the Word of God during our worship services – if we're not clear about who we are, then we can't hear clearly what God is saying to us.

God has now joined Jacob on his level – if Jacob is a wrestler, then God will come to Jacob as a wrestler. And this is where the blessing comes. Jacob learns that God has kept the promise to be with him and to bring him home (not just send him home). God lets Jacob know that he is not a passive distant deity – God is caught up in this relationship and will not let go.

And Jacob is willing to risk his life for the sake of the blessing – which turns out to be none other than the presence of the living God in our loneliest moments. When everything is on the line, God is there.

Unlike Jacob's time at Bethel, where he had the vision of a ladder to heaven, this is not a vision...it is not a nightmare. It's a real struggle that involves the whole person – spiritual, physical and emotional. And Jacob's crippled hip was a constant reminder that he had indeed wrestled with God.

So, Jacob limps into his future. He had wanted to appear strong when he met Esau. That's not going to happen – he is weak and vulnerable. The encounter he had so carefully planned never happened, but the unimaginable did. His vengeful brother welcomed and embraced him – maybe because of the limp.

It's interesting – there's a lot more loss in Jacob's life after he receives the blessing in that dark river gorge: he loses his beloved Rachel...his sons cause him grief...his last days are not in the Promised Land. And in all of this, he lives as a marked man – his limp reminds him and everyone around him, that in the most uncertain time of his life, God came to him in a way that he could understand.

And the limp marks him as one who would not give up. He was marked as God's own for the rest of his life. In fact, that echoes what we say when you are baptized: "You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." As I thought about this, I couldn't help but think about the Apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians:

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

With his limp, Jacob looked beaten down, but he was a man who had learned the hard way that while we are organizing and managing our passing personal affairs, God is involved in our lives for eternal purposes. When it looked like things were falling apart, Jacob experienced the unfolding grace of God as he struggled with the unknown adversary who was, in fact, the God of all the promises he counted on.

Terence Fretheim, a noted Old Testament scholar, said that this story of Jacob reminds us that "when it comes to daily struggles, we can count on God's mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, judging us. We may have to place our life at risk, knowing that the one who loses life will find it." *

Well, yet again, God has shown up in the life of a beloved child of God and it's not a pretty sight. What did Jacob do when God showed up? He held on. It took him a while to realize what was happening, but like St. Paul, he eventually realized that God had not left his side.

You may be locked in a great struggle with God. You didn't ask for it, but there it is. You will not let go and neither will he. He probably will not answer all your questions, and yet you will be marked by the struggle, never to be the same. You know as well as I that the uneventful times in our lives seldom lead to great encounters with God. We are more likely to see God as the day begins to break after a night of being

pushed up against God, with nowhere else to go.

But it is only then that we can move with hope into the future that we had feared, even if we limp on the way. But you know this for sure – God will never leave your side, even if He has to wrestle with you. So, when God shows up, hold on. You don't know what that future you have so carefully planned will hold, but you know who holds on to you. Let us pray.

Lord God, may we know that you have come to us in the darkest times and that you do not let us go. As Jacob wrestled with you and prevailed, may we, too, by the power of your Holy Spirit hold on to you for dear life. Amen.

* Fretheim, Terence, *New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Volume 1*, page 570