

Genesis 32:22-31

32:22 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.

32:23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

32:24 Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

32:25 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.

32:26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

32:27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

32:28 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."

32:29 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.

32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

32:31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Sermon: Blessings at Sunrise

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Wow! What a line! Hemingway would be jealous!

Doesn't this description remind you of the ending scene of a really good action movie or Western? Arnold Schwarzenegger or Bruce Willis or Clint Eastwood, or some other larger-than-life hero staggers off into the daybreak: In the background, Nakatomi Towers is in ruins, or some highway overpass is crumbling as hunks of steel and glass slide off its slopes. Our hero emerges from the smoke and ashes, and just keeps on going; clothes torn and limbs bleeding, he slowly puts one foot in front of the other. Wry smile on his face, maybe even with a little laugh, he says: "I did it! I completed the task. Somehow, I overcame my rough edges, I lived into my potential. God has helped steer me to the other side."

Today's pericope is the exclamation point on Jacob's twenty-year journey to becoming Israel. You'll remember that as a young man, Jacob had conspired with his Mother Rebekah to steal his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. And fearing for his life, Jacob fled Canaan for the safer pastures of his Uncle Laban. Along the way, Jacob dreamed a dream at Bethel, whereby God promised Jacob the same blessing given to his grandfather Abraham, and God promised Jacob that one day, he'd return home safely. And through conflict after conflict, God protected and blessed Jacob.

And now, today, twenty years later, one day away from meeting with and hopefully reconciling with his brother Esau, Jacob rests for the night at the River Jabbok. And while God has protected Jacob all these years, Jacob isn't gonna take any chances on reconciliation being a sure thing. He sends peace offerings to his brother Esau in advance of his arrival, and just to be safe, he divides his family and his servants into four groups – Should Esau have intentions of attacking him, at least Jacob's forces will be divided.

No sooner has Jacob's family crossed the river, then we are told that a strange man, a man we presume to be God, comes and wrestles with Jacob. We're told they wrestle all night long.

Imagine how exhausting this must have been? Muscles flexed and straining for hours. God assumes they'll come and dominate Jacob – it'll all be over in a matter of minutes. As the hours pass, God's frustration mounts – physical fatigue, and eventually mental fatigue set in. "Ugh, why must you be so stubborn?!? Submit! And let me be on my way!"

God eventually realizes the match is at a standstill, and so God does the only thing that will end it – God strikes Jacob in such a way as to dislocate his hip – it's the kind of blow that gets you a yellow card, maybe even a red one.

But guess what? The wrestling match still doesn't end. Thinking They've disabled Jacob, God begins to walk away. Jacob bear-hugs God's legs, and refuses to let go. God says, "Dude, let me go!!! It's daybreak, we've been at this all night. I'm tired, and I need to get on my way. I've got places to go and people to see!"

Jacob says, “No, not until you bless me!”

And ever so slightly, you can see a little grin form on God’s face. “Okay, what’s your name,” God says.

“Jacob.”

“Not anymore. Now it’s Israel, for you have striven with God and humans, and you have prevailed.”

And believing he’s playing with house-money, Jacob says, “Tell me your name.”

God just smiles. “Why does everyone want to know my name – Don’t they know I keep some things to myself. You have seen my face. You have touched me. You have heard me. You have experienced me. And you have not only survived, but you have thrived. I’ll give you something better than my name. I’ll give you my blessing. Go now in peace, friend. I am with you!”

The standstill comes to an end. One man walks away with the blessing he’s been promised. The other walks away with the mystery still intact.

Today’s text is a strange one. It’s both hopeful and unsettling at the same time. There’s an awful lot to process.

God protects Jacob and blesses Jacob, and all Jacob’s descendants, the community we know as Israel. As Christians, we claim that ancestry and the blessings that come with it. It’s good to be the people of Israel. If we are blessed, whom or what shall we fear? I like this text!

But this text is also unsettling. What kind of God seeks to dominate Their people like a wrestler seeks to pin an opponent? And what kind of God must use chop blocks or slide tackles to defeat Their opponents? What kind of God honors stolen birthrights and blessings? What kind of God chooses to bless one people group, but not another? And what if we're not one of those chosen people? Then what? Do I like this text?

We haven't the time this morning to declare this text wholly fulfilling or wholly unsettling. That's something we must each discern individually.

But here's what I will declare about today's text: it's one that's worthy of our time and attention.

A wrestling match is a fitting metaphor for Israel's relationship with God in any age.

Friends, we are a stubborn people! We seek to wrap our arms around a God much, much bigger than ourselves. And in our rush to grasp God, or tame God, or name God – this rush to make God a tangible, precise, known quantity, to make God a reflection of our own selves – we too often mischaracterize, or misinterpret, or minimize the vast mercies and wide possibilities of our Maker.

As theologian Douglas John Hall notes, "Often times, we think we have a hold on the truth of God. We've got it right here in our hands and you don't! We can shake God's truth at others like a stick. But God's truth is not something that can be held. Instead, God's truth has a hold on each of us!"

We wrestle to understand the complexities of our God. We show a determination to be God's people (though admittedly, we have our

good days and bad days). God notices that determination. God notices our stubborn desire to live in covenant. And God smiles. And God offers blessing. And even when we fail to live into God's covenant, God remains our God. God offers us grace and love. And it seems to me this process continues each time the sun rises and sets.

The ancient writers called it a wrestling match – a match that'll leave a person limping.

But when the sun rose over Peniel that day, Jacob crossed the Jabbok, and there he met his brother Esau. Esau embraced Jacob. The same God that had blessed Jacob, had also blessed Esau. Each man regained a brother. One offered apology. The other offered forgiveness. Both knew the peace of reconciliation. Both knew the blessings of God.

Friends, when we dissect a difficult text, we may come out of that process with a limp.

And when we cry out and fight tirelessly for the rights of those who are sick and hungry and poor and imprisoned and disenfranchised – when we live the words of Matthew 25, we may come out of that process with a limp.

And when we seek to live as the Acts community; when we love one another, and hurt one another, and forgive one another, and break bread once more with another, and we share all that we have of ourselves with one another, and we keep on doing it over and over again, we may come out of that process with a limp.

Blessings at Sunrise
Pentecost Nineteen, 10/19/2025
Bob Stillerman
Genesis 32:22-31



But limping or not, the sun is gonna rise over Millbrook Baptist Church.
And somewhere in this day, the next day, every day, is the presence of
a good God who offers each of us a good blessing.

May it always be so!

Amen.