

“YOUR ARM’S TOO SHORT TO BOX WITH GOD”

Gen 32:22-32

10-13-19

Preface: [the Scripture reading]

LEE

ACT 1: Jacob, a.k.a. Heelgrabber, Deceiver, Pushy Buttinski, is headed home to the land of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, because God has told him the time has come to claim his inheritance, not only the Promised Land but also the promise that “*nations [will] serve you and peoples bow down to you.*”

But between Jacob and all God’s blessing was Esau, his twin brother. Twenty years earlier Jacob had cheated Esau out of that birthright and blessing, infuriating him. Then Jacob had run for his life, hiding out some 400 miles away, where he made a life and raised a family. Now before Jacob could settle into his God-blessed life he had to face Esau who was coming to meet him with 400 men.

Despite actually seeing God’s angels encamped around him Jacob was terrified. He did everything he could think of to placate Esau and also to try to ensure the survival of at least half of his camp. And he prayed, **vv.9-11**:

JOHN

“O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.”

LEE

It’s a good prayer; a great prayer really, wrapping his fear in the great promises of God. It’s how we should all pray. Then there was really nothing left for Jacob to do but wait through a long,

sleepless night. Tomorrow he'd face Esau. And there the curtain goes down on ACT 1. Now for **ACT 2**.

JOHN

²² *That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.* ²³ *After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.* ²⁴ *So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.* ²⁵ *When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.* ²⁶ *Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."*

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ *The man asked him, "What is your name?"*

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ *Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

²⁹ *Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."*

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ *So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."*

³¹ *The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.* ³² *Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.*

Introduction:

- A. This story of Jacob wrestling with ‘the man’ is bigger than it looks, and as mysterious as any story in the Bible. It’s like some of the paintings I’ve seen (there are *lots* of them). I like the ones you have to look at for a while before you figure out what you’re seeing. This story is like that.

What’s more, though you may not see yourself in this story at first, it’s your story; our story. As I said last week, **Jacob is the Bible’s Everyman.** And this is the story of Israel. It is where Israel got their name. It is the story of all those on whom God fixes his love. It is your story and mine.

- B. Let’s walk back through that story to see behind the scenes and between the lines.

1. **Vv.22-23...** - Jacob couldn’t rest. His nerves were shot! He didn’t want to take any chances so he roused the whole camp there in the dark. Scattered torches flickering to life, sleepy children being awakened, exasperated mothers, animals complaining. All hustled across the ford of the river in the middle of the night, with servants lugging their possessions behind them. Then when everyone was settling down Jacob went back across the river into the deep darkness alone. It was so dark he couldn’t see his hand in front of his face. The darkness was heavy, foreboding, nervous.
2. **V.24** – “*So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him...*” Not *all* alone, apparently! Out of nowhere, with not so much as a rolling pebble to give him away, a man threw his arms around Jacob and threw him to the ground. Jacob’s muscles tensed and his heart jumped. He fought back. Who was this! What did he want? Esau? A robber? Who? One thing he knew for

sure: he couldn't die here. He *couldn't* get this close to God's promises only to be lose them all in a mugging.

To be clear, this 'man,' all muscled and sweating, panting and groaning with exertion, was a man to Jacob but he was actually the God in human disguise. Hosea identified him as an angel. That night in the dark, there was nothing to give the man away, at least at first.

The Hebrew word for 'wrestle' carries the idea of dirt. This fight was messy and muddy.

The writer, Moses, heightened the picture for his listeners with a three-way wordplay to help his hearers remember the story. The Hebrew word for *wrestle* is *avaq*, Jacob is *ya 'aqov*, and the river is *yabboq*, and here **the words are all entangled like the wrestlers themselves.** *avaq ya 'aqov* by the *yabboq*..

One more thing: "*wrestled with him till daybreak.*" Lighting is part of this staging of this drama. Dawn is almost like a character in this story, waiting in the wings for its big entrance. "*Till daybreak*" adds the elements of time and light, and both create tension. At the end, the dawn's light appears like the story's hero.

3. **V.25** – "*When the man saw that he could not overpower him...*" Now wait a minute!? This isn't some mere WWE brawler. Jacob might not have known it yet, but we do. Hosea the prophet, in retelling this story, says plainly, "*he struggled with God.*" Just because God was in a human disguise certainly didn't mean he couldn't pin Jacob!

Here's why: this wasn't a battle of muscles; it was a contest of wills. And Jacob's *will* was herculean, Olympian! The sense is that the 'man' couldn't make Jacob cry 'uncle,' couldn't make him quit fighting. He

was like Rocky, bloody, broken, staggering; but still standing This was sheer stubbornness! And when it came to a strong will, he was very nearly a match for God!

Then this downright dirty trick: “*he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.*” Oh, that’s low! This wasn’t some slick wrestling move. This was just God using his divine advantage. **Sometimes the only way God can bring us to our knees is by disabling us.** As for Jacob, sudden crippling pain. No leverage in his leg. But this fight was no longer about winning; it was about not letting go. Somewhere in that dark struggle Jacob figured out that this man was God, or God’s angel, and that to lose this struggle would be to lose his chance to grab the blessing of God. **He fought like a man possessed!** I picture Jacob, ever the Heel-grabber, sprawled on the ground, arms locked around the man’s leg, while the man drags him through the mud and says...

4. **V.26** – “*Let me go, for it is daybreak...*” There it is again, *daybreak*. Time is running out. The coming light apparently posed a greater risk than the fight. **To see the mysterious Fighter was more dangerous than to wrestle with him.**

“*But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’*” In retelling this story, the prophet Hosea says that Jacob “***wept and begged for his favor.***” This desperate plea has puzzled me because God had already *promised* Jacob his favor and his blessing, several times. So what’s he fighting for? **What blessing did he lack?**

5. Then a *non sequitur*—a statement that makes you think, *‘What does that have to do with anything?!’* Jacob gasps, “*I will not let you go unless you bless me*” And then (v.27), “*The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered.*” **Evidently Jacob’s name stood in the way of the blessing he so desperately wanted.** I wonder if Jacob blushed at the question. To say his name to the stranger was to pronounce his own indictment. For who could or would bless a man whose well-deserved name was Deceiver, Anything-To-Get-Ahead, Heel-Grabber, Pushy Buttinski. A man with a name like that didn’t stand a chance. “*Jacob,*” he confessed, like a man who says, “*Guilty, your honor.*”
6. (V.28) The fight had stopped and all was quiet but for their gasping. Jacob lay exhausted, weeping, clutching at his throbbing hip, when the man, for the third time, spoke the utterly unexpected, “*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.*”

Jacob was stunned. His mind was spinning. *Overcome?* He was lying spent, crippled, weeping and alone at the foot of God. *Overcome?!* With Esau and his 400 men waiting for him? And then he heard the name again: *Israel*. Translated literally it actually means *God struggles* but **when God struggles with you and I we struggle back, and when we finally beg for mercy, he gladly surrenders.**

Then it **dawned** on Jacob, you might say. He had prayed, only yesterday, that God would save him; from Esau is what he’d meant, but this was a saving he had never imagined. This new God-given name—this new identity—was a pardon, if there ever was one.

It was a strange upside-down name for the man who had spent his whole life trying to butt in at the front of the line, who would trick or trip to win. His new name—his wonderful, new, grace-filled, born-again name was *Israel*, the man who wrestled God for God’s blessing and won. The real story of Jacob’s life—the story worked out in the dark, behind the scenes, was not Jacob’s futile striving to grab life, but God’s relentless, grace-filled striving to pin Jacob down by his love

7. Only a moment later, Jacob named that place *Peniel*, meaning “*Face of God*,” because, as Jacob said, “*It is because I saw God face to face, and I was spared.*” *Saved*. I think there’s a double meaning: *I was spared despite seeing God’s face*, and *I was saved by seeing God’s face*.

C. **Here’s the thing. It wasn’t Esau who was standing between Jacob and the God-blessed life. It was God himself because while Jacob had always believed in God he had never really *trusted* him, never surrendered to him. He’d always thought that the way to secure God’s blessing was to grab it, to help himself.** Finally, in that dark night of his soul, Jacob prevailed by begging for God’s mercy.

I. **HERE, AS CLEARLY AS ANYWHERE IN THE BIBLE, WE SEE GOD’S *MODUS OPERANDI*, HIS COUNTERINTUITIVE WAY OF WINNING OUR HEARTS**

- A. He sets before a person the promise of the God-blessed life but before we can enjoy it, before we can enter into peace with God, there’s some serious business to be done. Not the battles we fear most, but facing the God in a contest of wills. In the dark. Alone.

- B. Like Jacob, we don't realize that our greatest weakness is our strong will. We've never noticed how stiff our neck is against his leading, never noticed how stubbornly evasive we've been around Jesus, never seen our own self-centered arrogance in treating God as a spectator or as our servant. We never thought the Bible's solemn warning applied to us, "*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.*" There's a line that opens an African-American sermon on the story of the prodigal son, "*Young man, young man—your arm's too short to box with God.*" [James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones*] We never realized we were in the ring with the Almighty.
- C. This is how people must come to God. Remember that Jacob had known God all his life. He'd even *seen* God high above the staircase to heaven. He'd been met by *angels* more than once. *Believing* in God wasn't his problem. But he had never surrendered to God. Maybe you were in that place. Maybe you are there now. I know some of you are.
- The wonder is that in the dawn's early light, when we finally glimpse whom we're fighting, it is the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in **2 Cor. 4:6** that "*the knowledge of the glory of God [is] in the face of Christ.*" We surrender to God by laying hold of the Lord Jesus Christ, begging for his mercy. We overcome by surrendering. **It is such a complete transformation that Jesus called it being *born again*.** Which is very much like getting a new name.
- D. To be given the name Israel—God-Wrestler—well, I guess it isn't *that* great a name. I mean *God's Champion* would be nice. Or *God's Favorite*. But *God-Wrestler*? It is a name that tells us as much about our God as ourselves. Who could imagine a God who loves someone so much as to

come in person to him, and not just to speak to him, but to *wrestle* with him—there in the dirt and darkness. The intimacy and humility of God! And not just to wrestle with him but to let him prevail upon God through *tears and by begging for mercy*.

And for Jacob’s part—for Israel’s part—is a badge of honor. We are a people who have wrestled with God, desperate for his blessing, and he has given it to us. **We are, by the grace of Almighty God, the God-Wrestlers!**

- E. This wrestling is how people are saved. “*I saw the face of God and was saved.*” But, often, it isn’t easy. You see, **God is wrestling the stubbornness out of us.** He’s exhausting our self-sufficiency. He’s purging our pride. That is what God did with Jacob there by the Jabbok. He conquered him in order to save him. **Frederick Buechner** called it, “*the magnificent defeat,*” and he called God, “*the beloved Enemy.*” That is God’s M.O., his *modus operandi*, his regular way of working in people’s lives.

Illus.: Do you remember how **C. S. Lewis** described his conversion? Lewis was a brilliant British scholar who was also a thoroughgoing agnostic. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he described his conversion like this:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

Lewis could have been writing for Jacob instead of himself:

“I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.”

- F. This pattern occurs again and again over the course of our Christian lives. Off in the distance is a promise of God. But first we must wrestle with God till we prevail, flat on our backs, with tears in our eyes, pleading for God’s blessing. And God says, *“You win.”*

Illus.: Let me tell you one of mine. When I came to VCL almost 22 years ago this congregation was in trouble. Spiritually abused, torn by conflicts, people leaving. I had an uneasy feeling that there was something toxic among us, as if there was something in the water poisoning us.

Six months after I came I planned to preach on the story of Achan in the book of Joshua. Achan’s hidden sin was the cause of Israel’s defeat the next time they went into battle.

I was afraid that there was something hidden under the carpet of this congregation, some unseen sin that had taken root among us. I prayed that God would use that sermon to cleanse us, whatever it took. I decided to do something I’d never done before nor since. I decided to spend that Saturday night here at church, praying as long as I could.

As I prayed—wrestled, you might say—I began to wonder if there was any chance I could be like Achan. Was there anything I was hiding. And I thought of... oh, let’s

call him **Sam**. He was a man in our previous church. He was a good and godly man but his nitpicking just about did me in. No need for details but I harbored a grudge. He had become a sort of the representative of several people who had made my life difficult and I resented him for it.

So deep into that night in this creaking, dark building, kneeling at one of these pews, I wrestled with God. “OK,” I finally said to God, “*I’ll do whatever you want me to do. I’ll even call Sam now, in the middle of the night, if you want me to. What do you want me to do?*” Sam didn’t even know how angry I’d been with him so to ask for his forgiveness wouldn’t really be beneficial to him. Then God reminded me of something Jesus said in Luke 6. “*Bless those who curse you.*” Well, Same certainly hadn’t cursed me but God told me to bless him. “*Whenever you think of Sam,*” God said, “*bless him. Think well of him and lift his name to me with a prayer that I would bless his life.*”

So that’s what I did. And the next morning when I preached on the story of Achan, at the end of the sermon I asked people who needed to confess hidden sin to raise their hands, and so far as I could see, no one did. But I had, the night before, here in the dark. And that morning, as the dawn rose over our church, I believe we turned the corner once and for all, and saw the face of God.