

“God Wrestling”
P19/C/Genesis 32/10-17-04

And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint ...”

Genesis 32:24-25

Had someone accidentally wandered into Longview's City Council meeting last Thursday evening, without knowing the purpose of that forum, he might have concluded that he had walked into church – albeit a very unusual church – one in which adherents think nothing of berating one another in the most derisive manner, *in the name of Jesus*. The sheer volume of scriptures quoted was impressive – as was the number of personal testimonies given. These latter tended to follow a common pattern: “I've been wrestling with God in prayer regarding this awful mess in our city, and I've come to the conclusion that God pretty much sees things as I do – and if you don't, well you're just a dumb jerkwad - Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, Amen!”

I was left wondering, “Really? You've wrestled with *God*? Gosh, when I wrestle with God, I never come out that confident and sure of myself. There's not much left of me afterward. It's just too exhausting. It's too penetrating. It's too ripping. And the last thing I want to do is go and tell everyone about it.”

This was Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok. His brother Esau was furious for having been robbed of his birthright and had vowed to kill Jacob the first chance he got – the Sneaky Little Cheat. You see, Jacob had never been happy, had never been at peace with his life, always wanted more, thought he was somehow owed more. He didn't like being second in anything – not even being born second in line to his twin brother Esau. We're told he grabbed hold of Esau's heel in the birth canal in an attempt to climb over him and be first. “Heel-grabber”, that's what “Jacob” means.

You know how Heel Grabber tricked his old blind father into giving the blessing of the first born son to him. When Esau found out, he wanted to kill Jacob, so Jacob left town and went to a distant country where he met Laban – a guy just like him. Laban had two daughters – one young and beautiful; the other old and ugly. Jacob worked for Laban seven years to gain Miss Syria in marriage, but on the wedding night, Laban slipped Old Ugly into the wedding dress, and when Jacob lifted the

veil, what a surprise he got! But Jacob was undaunted and worked 14 more years to get Miss Beautiful. He didn't forget, though, and he rustled a herd of Laban's prize cattle and took off for home under the cover of night.

Going home, however, brought back an old problem – Esau's anger. And Jacob's fear is confirmed when he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with an army of four hundred. Jacob camped at a little stream called the Jabbok. The Jabbok is a place of honesty. It's a place of struggling with God – it's a place of repentance and a change of heart. It's a dividing line between the past and the future. Sometimes we have to deal with our past if there is going to be any future.

What I want to propose to you is that Jacob's biggest problem was not Esau, but God. Jacob can probably handle Esau. After all, he's Heel Grabber, the ultimate con-man, the slick politician, strong on guts and weak on conscience, who knows what he wants and puts all his energies into getting it. He's got a plan – he's never without a plan. He put together quite an impressive gift for brother Esau. And, if you know the whole story, you know this is will probably work. You'll remember how, years ago, Esau was famished after a long day of work in the fields. And here came Jacob with a bowl of oatmeal, and Esau licked his lips and sold Jacob his birthright for that mush. A sucker is born every minute! Yes, Jacob will probably handle Esau just fine.

But, for a little insurance, Jacob calls on God – “Lord, you *gotta* save me from Big Dummy, after all, *you're* the one who told me to go home; *you* promised to do good by me. I know you'll see things my way.”

I came to the Jabbok in my first parish. I had two calls presented to me at graduation from seminary – one as an associate pastor in a larger, progressive congregation, the other as a solo pastor in a rural, very traditional parish. I accepted the latter. I had something to say and was going to preach and preach every Sunday. There was some shaking up to do, and I was the one to do it. That parish was going to lose its “But we've never done it that way before” attitude. I put my first sermon together in just a few hours, satisfied it would do to launch the intended revival. By the four-page, double-spaced manuscript, I could tell that it was 12-15 minutes long – just like we were taught.

Well, Sunday came and I stepped into the pulpit, and was so nervous that three minutes later I was done. I felt like a complete failure and cried and argued with God all the way home. That afternoon there was a function at the church and it took every ounce of courage I could muster to go back. Allan Halverson met me at

the door and shoved something into my hands. It was on of those hourglass shaped, sand filled three minute egg timers! He had prepared a little speech to go along with it, but was laughing so hard he never got it out.

A few days later I camped at the Jabbok, preparing my second sermon. Esau showed up, looking just like Allan Halverson, and saying, “How’s old 3-minute?” Then a bell rang and I wrestled with God all that day and into the night and next morning. Every word of sermon #2 was a drop of blood, and somewhere in the night I felt my hip dislocate. I think I would have long ago gone mad if all my sermon preparation since lasted as long and were as strenuous. But as painful and humbling as that experience was, it brought a great blessing. It taught me that God is faithful and true. It taught me the truth of what God said through Isaiah: “My word goes forth from my mouth and will not return to me empty. It will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Is. 55:10-11). Do you know how freeing that is? It tells me that God is more than a little involved in the sermon building process, thank you very much, and what happens with God’s word is not for me to force or control or worry over. I humble-down, get quiet enough to let God have some input; then I speak the word – and God takes care of the results. To this day I wrestle with God every time I prepare a sermon, and I will not let him go until he again gives me that same blessed assurance.

How wonderful it would be if one such experience were enough to cancel need for future Jabboks. But such is not the case for people with even a little of Jacob’s spirit in them, and four years later I wrestled with God again. I had come to Tyler, my second parish, as full of myself as I had ever been. “Bishop, you’re asking me to take a handful of people meeting in a beer hall and build them into a going, growing congregation with its very own base of operation? No problem. I’ll handle it for you.”

At the heart of that community was a core of people who loved one another, were family to one another. But as we grew, relationships began to fracture and fray. People began to devour one another. Once again, I felt like a horrible failure. I had once dreamed that God was going to do a great thing through me and this fledgling congregation. But within just a year I was having a hard time believing that God could use me to do anything. The ghost of Allan Halvorson came back, carrying a giant egg timer and pulling a wagon full of 3-minute sermons.

Do you hear all the “I’s” in that? There was my failure. The failure of that tiny congregation was not my failure, but “I” had to make it mine because “I” was just

way too important. But, again, God is faithful. God broke through my misery and reminded me of Jabbok. I ran there as fast as I could and set up camp. People who fail and can honestly admit their failure want to get to God and get forgiven and made new. The bell rang and the match was on. Night after sleepless night we wrestled. Each night I said, "I'm not letting go until you bless this mess too!" And, finally, one night I felt the hip joint slip. Right then I was given what the psalmist had prayed for, "*Restore in me the joy of your salvation...*"

You know, things got a lot better after that - for me, for relationships in the parish. And let me tell you this: from that day on I have never doubted God's grace. I have never doubted that he can make any failure the foundation of my greatest impact. I have never again doubted his presence in this sacrament where he tells us by sound and sight and taste that he is for us. I walked with a limp after each Jabbok. I still walk with a limp. I have a blessed handicap, a wonderful dependency.

I still camp at the Jabbok every now and then. The bell rings and God and I get it on. I throw everything I have at him, but he always wins. I lose, but am a joyful loser because I have felt him and know him – he is real.

AMEN