

Genesis 32:22-32

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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GIVE ME A PIECE

Our scripture for today talks about a man named Jacob. Before we see how he ended up wrestling with God we need to look at how he got here. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, one of Father's of faith. He was born to Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob began his life as a wrestler. He was born a twin to Esau. When he came out of his mother's womb he was holding the heel of his brother. I believe Jacob spent most of his life trying to get a piece of something.

Isaac and Rebekah did not treat their sons equally. Isaac favored Esau. He loved hunting and spent most of his time bonding with his Father. His brother was the object of his Mother, Rebekah's affection. Jacob stayed with her in the tents. The family structure of their time did not help Jacob's cause. The oldest male of the household received the birthright or the right to his Father's property and household along with a blessing. Even though they were twins Esau received the privileges of being the oldest.

Jacob did not let that get in his way. One day Esau came in from the fields thirsty and famished from the strong sun. Well, the tent dweller Jacob stood by a hot pot of stew. Esau asked for the stew and Jacob refused. Esau pleaded with him. And in a condescending way Jacob said, "Sure I will give you stew if give me your birthright." Blinded by hunger Esau said yes. Esau was now filled with food and later with anger. Jacob wanted a piece of the birthright.

It didn't end there. As Isaac lay in his deathbed he prepared to bless his eldest son, Esau. Rebekah, Jacob's advocate, over heard his wishes to do so and hatched a plan. While her other son was out hunting she told Jacob to put on a hairy coat to disguise himself as his brother. The trick worked. Jacob slithered away with the right to land and blessing by God. He wanted a piece of the blessing. Esau was outraged. His brother took away all that was owed to him. Fearful for his life, Rebekah sent Jacob away to the land of his Uncle Laban in Paddan-aram.

Jacob was much like the author Stephen Zanichowsky. He floundered in a family of 14 children also the title of his book, Growing up in a crowd. His large family drove him to want to be alone. Nothing belonged to him. Stephen's own identity did not feel like his own because it was always connected to the huge family in which he grew up. If he went to a restaurant the patrons would recognize him as part of the clan of Zanichowsky's.

It isn't until his adolescence when a new world of senses fueled by emotion and hormones that he made a profound discovery. His brother Paul shared an experience with him about the teenage life. Stephen writes about his brother Paul , "The truth is, Paul was bringing to me feelings that would hound me for the next thirty years: the idea that, for someone else to have something, it had to be taken from me first; that I could feel another's gain as my loss." Jacob must have felt the same way for the twenty years that he was separated from his brother.

But those years weren't put to waste. When he arrived in the new town he instantly fell in love with Rachel the daughter of Laban. Laban put him to work for 7 years for her hand in marriage. After some tent and veil trickery Laban gave his younger daughter Leah to Jacob. After another 7 years of work in the fields Jacob was able to marry the woman who he was in love with for 14 years. He had to wait for a piece of love.

In fourteen years Jacob helped grow Laban's flock and land. He begins to realize that much of what Laban has is his. Why not take what he has worked for? If the tent and veil trick was not enough to fuel him, this was. Perhaps Jacob was similar to Stephen and said to himself, "Why is it that everything that is mine I've had to wrestle for?" Our fighter was determined to get a piece of Laban's flock.

Laban does surrender some of the goods Jacob is owed. Jacob packs up his family, servants and flocks and goes on the trek back to his homeland. He knows that he will come face to face with his brother.

Our scripture picks up here. He is lying on one side of the Jabbock river. Rachel, Leah and their children are on the other side. He is alone in the night hoping that his brother Esau won't kill him when they meet the following day.

Something changes at night. The light has ceased to shine. When the day ends we are left alone with the thoughts of the day, our insecurities may rise and fears knock on the door. Night doesn't just have to be physical darkness. Night can bring emotional pain.

God chose to come to Jacob at night. God can come to us at night. And God wrestles with Jacob. Can you imagine wrestling with God? I can. The elements of wrestling prove this point. Two opponents are face to face in this struggle. One has to overtake the other to win the game and the winner is the stronger of the two.

I've wrestled with God. The last year of Seminary is like the end of any other grad school. Piles of books awaited me in my dorm room. I had the wonderful opportunity to choose where I would go after graduation. However, it's different when you are in seminary. The three years you spend studying aren't just to help your career. No, this is a life calling and God is in charge. I waited for an answer from God and got nothing. People

were asking me, “What are your plans after graduation?,” as if you can list them as easy as picking fried chicken over pizza for Friday night dinner. I prayed and all I heard is a silent voice on the other line. Nights included long incessant talks with God. I said, “Don’t you know it’s February and I don’t have any interviews? Where can I live when I’m kicked out of the dorm?”

I was like Jacob because I wrestled to get a piece of God. My piece of God was supposed to comfort me and tell me in which direction to move. I thought God was silent and I wanted our creator to show up in the way I expected. Our expectation is the problem. Limiting God to one way to move in our lives holds us back from true relationship.

But beyond this we have light in the midst of our night. We have moments of revelation. Daniel Migliore explains this in his book called, “Faith seeking Understanding.” He writes about the revelation of God in five points.

1. God takes the initiative to freely communicate with us. 2. God points to particular events and people. 3. The Holy one calls for a response from the entire person. 4. Revelation is always a disturbing event because it disrupts the way we have previously understood God, the world and ourselves. Finally, it transforms our imagination and bursts through our expectations for God.

So what is our revelation through the story of Jacob? God is willing to be face to face with us when the time comes. When our motives need to be checked God is there. Remember Yahweh didn’t come down with overwhelming power. Jacob overpowered God in their wrestling match. After their tussle God gave Jacob a new name. Israel was Jacob’s new name. He was the beginning of a people. We too can be renamed. When it comes down to it, who cares if you walk with a limp?