

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Genesis 32:22-32**  
***Wrestling With Angels***  
**November 16, 2008**

*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. [23] He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. [24] Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. [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. [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." [27] So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." [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." [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. [30] So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." [31] The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. [32] Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

Everyone likes a good fight--until we get involved personally. I recognize that this is an odd way to start a sermon, but hear me out. There is something quite exhilarating about watching someone else involved in a struggle, a conflict. Do you remember that movie *Rocky*? It is about a street wise but slow-witted boxer named Rocky Balboa, who finally got a chance to fight the heavyweight champion of the world--every boxer's dream! I loved this movie as a kid, and use to dream of being a boxer, just like Rocky. But something held me back--I don't like to fight, I just like to watch them! I was no good at it. I always felt like I had to apologize if I hit someone with my boxing glove. Don't laugh, you are probably the same way. Everybody likes a struggle, but no one wants to be the one involved in it.

This story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord has both fascinated and puzzled me. Jacob's story is a story of conflict, a story of struggle, a story of meeting God.

We are here this morning, because we say we want to meet God. But what would you do if you found God, or were found by God? Some of us might run the other way. That is what Adam and Eve did. That is what Jonah did. That is even what the Apostle Paul did. Maybe that is why some of you came to church this morning, because you are running from God. You may feel that if you go to church, act religious, sing a few nice hymns, and endure a sermon, then you have once again avoided God, by avoiding the real issues of life, avoiding struggling with God.

Authentic faith is a struggle, a wrestling match, a fight unto the death. *Chicken-Soup For the Soul*, may generate good and sentimental stories, but, we generally don't live there. We live where Jacob lives. Negotiating through family squabbles, running out of fear, searching for acceptance – that is where Jacob has been living.

Fred Buechner wrote a beautiful novel, based on the life of Jacob called, *Son of Laughter*. In this novel, Buechner uses the name, "Fear," for God. It is not a bad name for God, for I suspect, that we all call God "Fear" at some point, which may explain why we avoid struggling or grappling with God.

Nothing really comes easy for Jacob. He is the second born, and therefore gets only the leftovers of his father's attention. He tricks his brother of his birthright, and his father and brother of a blessing, and then Jacob has to run for his life. While away from Esau, Jacob becomes prosperous, and what we would call a successful man. Now, however, he is returning back to his homeland and will face his past. His past has a name: Esau.

Jacob sends messengers ahead to meet Esau. It is an early effort to make peace with his past. The messengers come back and say that Esau is on his way to meet you - and he is bringing four hundred men with

him! This family reunion is off to a bad start, for Esau is bringing his own militia. Jacob turns to prayer and reminds God of God's promise and asks for God's deliverance. Jacob then resorts to his old familiar ways and comes up with a strategy to deal with Esau. Jacob intends to buy him off. He sets apart a sizable portion of his herd of goats, sheep, rams, camels, cows and donkeys. This herd would come to Esau in droves, one after another. Jacob says, "*I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me*" (Genesis 32:20).

Once the plan is set in motion, Jacob sends the family on ahead across the river, and there he spends the night alone at the River Jabbok. This important river is east of the Jordan, and the Arabs called it the Blue River. None of that is really important. Jacob is alone, and his family and possessions are on one side, while his thoughts and fears on the other.

Buechner writes in the voice of Jacob at the river: "I knew what lay behind me. I did not know what lay ahead of me. The river lay between." (p. 157) How much of our life is spent right there at the river? Our past we know about, with all of its failures and successes. On the other side of that river, however, is an uncertain future laced with fears and peril. All we really know is where we are...now, in the present.

Jacob is alone at night by the river, preparing for who knows what. Old memories of shame, trickery, and deception: in the daylight they could be buried, but at night, they rise up to haunt and disturb.

And then it happens, and it is not what any of us expect. A man – that is how it written in the scriptures – a man wrestles Jacob. Interpreters of this story have speculated who this man was. Some say, this story is an ancient one, and the man is a river demon, but reading the whole story, that doesn't seem to work. Others say, it could be Esau who surprised him in the dead of night. Growing up with brothers where we often looked for an opportunity to get the advantage with a headlock, or an elbow to the ribs or some other maneuver this interpretation is certainly plausible. Still, the thought, that this is Esau, doesn't quite make sense either. The prophet Hosea looks back to the story, and calls the man an angel, but he was probably just being poetic. As the story concludes, Jacob discovers that who he has been wrestling with all night is God.

Intriguing image, is it not? There, in the darkness, alone, struggling for all he is worth, with...who? God? I've been at the river at dark, haven't you? Struggling against God and God's mysteries, God's hiddenness.

Brothers and sisters, I want us to be the kind of people and the kind of church, that when God engages us, we will be up for the conflict. For there are things and people and issues that need our full engagement.

This morning, I read in the paper about the rise in racial violence and threats since the election of our nation's first African-American president. This sickens my soul. We must move beyond the history of racial strife, and I want our church to lead the way in this ongoing struggle. And make no mistake about it, it is fight like none other.

Speaking of fighting, as the story unfolds we read that Jacob is quite the man. Whether wrestling with men or God, Jacob will hang on as long as it takes, even if it takes all night long. And all night long they fight with each other, and at some point, the man dislocates Jacob's hip. We are wont to think, that when you engage God, there is forgiveness, reconciliation, even restoration and healing. Jacob is crippled for life. When God gets a hold of you, you will never be the same again.

In this story that speaks of Jacob's religious encounter with God, there is the lesson of a paradox: there is weakness in power and power in weakness. This foreshadows the theology of the New Testament, concerning the power through the weakness of the cross.

The picture is one of exhaustion, as dawn is about to emerge. Two wrestlers caked in mud and blood along the river, lean into each other in an exhausted heap. Finally, this man, this angel, this divine being speaks,

and he says something that I am not sure what to make of: “*Let me go for the day is breaking.*” Jacob says, “*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*”

As I mull this over, there is so much truth to what Jacob is doing: hanging on. The struggle of faith is in the hanging on, sometimes for dear life. We are hanging on to the unanswered prayers, hanging on to the unrealized dreams and disappointments, hanging on to the issues of this world that matter, hanging on, because you have yet to realize the blessing. What Jacob meant by a blessing, one cannot be too sure—perhaps, more land, more wealth, or more power.

Instead of a blessing, the man asks Jacob his name and Jacob tells him. Most of Jacob’s life he has lied and manipulated others with his name. He told his daddy he was Esau, in order to get his father’s blessing. In the name of Jacob, he tricked his brother out of his birthright. In the name of fear, he sent his own wives and children ahead of him, right into the perceived danger of Esau and his militia. Jacob cared about his image for his own sake, but this midnight wrestler gives Jacob a new name and image. “*Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men and have prevailed.*” (vv. 28-29) Instead of a blessing, Jacob gets a new identity. The ambiguities of Jacob’s character are before us all. Now he was to be moved beyond his past and cross over into a new identity.

Jacob in turn, in so many words says, “Okay, I have told you my name, now tell me yours.” Jacob thought he had him. I mean they ended the fight in a draw, right? He wants to know the name of the divine, to bridge the distance between himself and God. Jacob did not lose the wrestling match, but, he did not win on this one. The stranger shrugs him off with a rather dismissive, “Why is it that you ask my name?” and blesses Jacob, and apparently disappears. “Faith is what you do between the last time you experienced God and the next time you experience God.” (*Renita J. Weems, professor of Old Testament studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School*) Hobbling into his future, Jacob named the place “Peniel,” which means, “the face of God.”

This story shapes still the experience of the people of God in the face of God: striving through the night, wrestling for peace, for blessing, for security, for healing. Walking, or I should say limping away injured, and yet prevailing. Exhausted and spent, new identities are invoked and a future awaits. This has been Israel’s history throughout the scriptures. We too, adopted into this family of God, cannot expect a different relationship.

What are the “lessons” in this story? That life with God is a struggle in the dark night of the soul? That if you want a blessing, be ready to strive for it and hang on for dear life even if it takes you all night long? That when you take God seriously, you will change? Perhaps, but this story is not so much a discovery of one’s self, as it is about God. Seeing God face to face, now Jacob knows and now we know, too.

Now, we really know that God does not despise us, even when we are most despising. One author writes that God does not despise us: “for our supplanting and deceit, but forever ambushes our lives with new chances; that God does not renege on promises made even under duress; that God may slip away at daybreak, but never abandons us; that God can render us vulnerable to all our fast-approaching Esaus, the siblings we robbed of birthrights with whom we must make peace; that the gracious reunion of sinners and sinned-against is the blessing of God.” (*J. Mary Luti, The Christian Century*)

*You are Israel.* You are the one that is willing to hang on to God in spite of your checkered past and your anxious future. You are Israel. You are the one blessed by God, the Ancient of Days, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God made in Jesus the Carpenter.