

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We've been doing these semi-continuous readings for our first lesson for the last couple of months. While we've been doing these readings from Genesis, and I don't know about you all, but I have really enjoyed it. It's helped to remind me of these events that were so crucial to the development of all of those who were called by God.

Now I do know, though, that we jump around a lot with these lessons. We end up leaving out big chunks of the story. Last week we had Jacob's marriage, first to Leah and then to her sister Rachel. But since Pastor Hardy was here last Saturday night, while I was then Sunday morning over in the nave, I didn't get to preach on THAT whole little scenario.

So to quickly bring us up to speed here: remember the whole story with Jacob starts, with Jacob and his twin brother Esau born to Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob finagles the birthright from Esau, then with the help of his mother he gets the blessing from his father, that's really suppose to go to his brother, which really ticks off his brother to the point where Esau is waiting for dad to die so that Esau can then go and KILL Jacob. So Jacob does the smart thing and he runs away. He runs off to go be with Uncle Laban, his mother's brother (I know there's a lot of names, just try to get the overall picture, don't take notes). Jacob runs away to be with Uncle Laban where he meets and falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel, a beautiful young woman. Jacob makes a deal with Uncle Laban that he'll work seven years if he can marry Rachel. Which he does; he works seven years. As a matter of fact he loves Rachel so much that in Genesis 29 it says the seven years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." Now, we know Jacob has pulled a couple of fast ones on other people, but Uncle Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. Because on the marriage ceremony night, instead of marrying Rachel like he wanted to, he actually ends up marrying older sister Leah, which he doesn't find out about until the morning (Which also says a **whole lot** about the amount of wine he had to drink).

But besides that, he and Uncle Laban work out a deal: he'll work another seven years in order to be able to marry Rachel. So during those years, Jacob is extremely prolific between, Rachel and Leah and then their two maids. When the production of those twelve children comes to an end, Jacob goes to Uncle Laban and says 'you know, I have been here long enough and I think it's about time that I be heading back home.' And Laban, who is nobodies fool, he knows that the reason that his own crops and flocks have been doing so wonderfully that they have flourished is because the Lord God has been blessing Jacob, as Jacob has tended the flock and is overseeing the crops. So he pretends that he is going to give Jacob a blessing, that he doesn't want Jacob to leave empty handed "so what should I give you?" Laban says. Now Jacob has been thinking about this and so he says, 'Well, let me pass through your flock and let me take all of the speckled and spotted and black lambs and goats; and those will be my wages. You can have all of the nicely colored white or brown sheep and goats and cattle, but I'll take all of the discoloured ones.' Well wouldn't you know it, that of course there's an explosion of speckled,

spotted, black and striped critters of all forms. And Jacob, then once they're of age, he very quickly gathers up his extended family, all of his critters, all of his people and they head out for home. The closer he gets back to home, the more he hears word that older brother Esau is coming to meet Jacob with 400 fighting men. So Jacob sends in front of him gifts of animals and servants in order to appease his brother. And then the night before he figures that he will end up meeting his brother, they're camped there at the river Jabbok, he sends across to the other side, and that is where our lesson picks up tonight.

We don't really know why he is sending them across. We figure, apparently he knows or he anticipates **something** is going to happen - because there beside the River Jabbok Jacob begins to wrestle, "a man." The Greek word there is *νθρωπος*. (anthropos.) A bit better accurate translation would be to say "human being." (I know, you heard me say "the Greek word," and you're all thinking 'The Old Testament is written Hebrew.' I don't *know* Hebrew, so I had to look at my Greek translation and that's the word "anthropos," which is the word that we get our English word anthropology from, the study of human beings. It is not necessarily a "male" when it says he wrestled a man, but he wrestled a human being. But anyway that is one of those asides that I always do).

So just like back when he was inside his mother's womb with his brother Esau and they were bouncing around in there battling each other, he wrestles this being all night long - not winning, but not losing either. Dawn approaches and this individual sees that it is becoming very close to being an unwinnable situation and so he touches Jacob's hip and BAM! His hip is out of joint. He says 'Now you can't do anything more, let me Go.' Jacob has a one track mind, he says 'No, not until you bless me.' I've got to wonder who Jacob thinks he is really playing around with. Yes, he's outwitted his brother, but from the most part what we know about Esau that's really not very hard to do. He's outwitted his father. Now at least with that one he did have help from mom in outwitting his father. But we also need to remember that Isaac is the one who, as a child, ended up getting all tied up and was about to be sacrificed up on the mountain top by his dad, so I am not all that certain how sharp Isaac was. He **has** outwitted Uncle Laban, who outwitted him in turn. He's apparently has an INKLING of who this is that he's been hitting the mats with all night long. And he says "I won't let you go, unless you bless me." Does this guy have a death wish? Maybe his testosterone level is off the charts, it's hard to say. But regardless, he gets what he asks for: a blessing. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Or, as we might better understand it, you will no longer be called "the one who takes by the heel" but rather you will be called "the one who strives with God."

Jacob - crafty, conniving, scheming, calculating Jacob - has spent the night wrestling with the One whom, if that One's face is seen, the human being dies. But more than that - Jacob wrestles out of the Lord God Almighty a blessing. Even more work that was then wrestling out the blessing from Isaac. Maybe Jacob's the luckiest guy around; it's hard to know. But as I read that account I was reminded of the ways that I have wrestled with God. Now it's not been at the side of the River Jabbok wrestling all night long, but I wrestled with God trying to figure out whether or not I should go to seminary. I wrestled with God when I was twenty-five selling shoes at J.C. Penny, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I have wrestled

with God about other things as well. What have you wrestled with God about? More importantly, who won?

Our current synodical bishop, Reverend Penrose Hoover, happens to be married to a classmate of mine. Reverend Hoover was elected bishop, not this June, but June of 2007. Sharon, his wife, my friend, related to a group this story that had happened that June after Penrose had been elected. They were at home and Penrose was fuming around the house, grumbling at God: ‘Why did you do this to me? How could you do this to me? What do you want me to do? You’ve got the wrong man.’ And Sharon, without looking up from the newspaper, said to him “do you really think you’re going to win this argument?”

We’re human beings. We want to be in control. We think we know what’s best for us in terms of employment, in terms of relationships, in terms of financial requirements or home stereo equipment or automobiles, or clothing, or education. I know what’s best for me. I know. And then God comes along and tosses me down on the mat. Now, unlike Jacob, I’ve not had my name changed. I have pretty much always been called “John” - but I suppose I could argue that I have had a name change because there are those that cannot call me “John,” but can only call me “Pastor.” They can’t get my name out.

Having wrestled a human blessing out of his father, Jacob then wrestled with God until he received divine blessing. When I wrestle with God, I am really not going after a blessing. But rather than thinking of wrestling with God as a bad thing, what if we look at wrestling with God as a way to take a risk. A way to challenge or strengthen or increase our own faith. We wrestle with God as individuals. What if we as a congregation were to wrestle with God? Where would that lead us? What ministry would Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Congregation be involved in? What parts of the community might we be reaching out to if we, as a congregation were to wrestle with God, to strive to increase our own faith?

Several months ago when Pastor Hardy announced his impending retirement in January of 2010, there was a group formed and they began asking a series of questions, more or less coming down to these: What are our strengths as a congregation?; what are our weaknesses as a congregation? And; where do we as a congregation want to be in five years? These questions are being asked in part, so that as we begin to interview for a new senior pastor, in a year and a half, we can say to him or her: ‘This is where we want to go, this is how we feel God is calling us. Are you able to lead us there?’ Over the last weekend in May there was a morning long event open to the entire congregation to discuss those same questions. And the phrase that came out from that meeting is – Disciples in the Making, Making Disciples.

So how do we wrestle with God? What are the bold ways that we strive for God’s blessing? Maybe as a congregation it’s that we build a new worship space specifically designed for Contemporary Worship that would seat 500 people. Maybe we actively open our doors to Hispanic ministry. Maybe we take Vicar Barbara’s survey from two years ago to heart; the survey that said that as she interviewed one hundred people up and down Market Street, that most of those people - if they knew Trinity at all - only knew us as a big building here on Market Street. Where would God have us go? What would God have us do? Those are the questions that we as individuals wrestle with; that we as a congregation wrestle with. Regardless, though,

we are called. We are called to be like Jacob - to wrestle with God, to be willing to take that risk. We are called to trust in God that God will guide us wherever we go. Amen.

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