

Blessings at Sunrise
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
Genesis 32:21-31
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The sun rose upon him as he passed Penueel, limping because of his hip.

Wow! What a line! Hemingway would be jealous!

Doesn't this description remind you of the ending scene of a really good action movie or Western? Arnold Schwarzenegger or Bruce Willis or Clint Eastwood, or some other larger-than-life hero staggers off into the daybreak: In the background, Nakatomi Towers is in ruins or some highway overpass is crumbling as hunks of steel and glass slide off its slopes. Our hero emerges from the smoke and ashes, and just keeps on going; clothes torn and limbs bleeding, he slowly puts one foot in front of the other. Wry smile on his face, maybe even with a little laugh, he says: "I did it! I completed the task. Somehow, I overcame my rough edges, I lived into my potential. God has helped steer me to the other side."

Today's lection is the exclamation point on Jacob's twenty-year journey to becoming Israel. You'll remember that as a young man, Jacob had conspired with his Mother Rebekah to steal his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. And fearing for his life, Jacob fled Canaan for the safer pastures of his Uncle Laban. Along the way, Jacob dreamed a dream at Bethel, whereby God promised Jacob the same blessing given to his grandfather Abraham, and God promised Jacob that one day, he'd return home safely. And through conflict after conflict, God protected and God blessed Jacob.

And, now, twenty years later, one day away from meeting with and hopefully reconciling with his brother Esau, Jacob rests for the night at the River Jabbok. And while God has protected Jacob all these years, Jacob isn't gonna take any chances on reconciliation being a sure thing. He sends peace offerings to his brother in advance of his arrival, and just to be safe, he divides his family and his servants into four groups – Should Esau have intentions of attacking him, at least Jacob's forces will be divided.

No sooner has his family crossed the river, then we are told that a strange man, a man we presume to be God, comes and wrestles with Jacob. We're told they wrestle all night long.

Imagine how exhausting this must have been? Muscles flexed and straining for hours. God assumes he'll come and dominate Jacob – it'll all be over in a matter of minutes. As the hours pass, God's frustration mounts – physical fatigue, and eventually mental fatigue set in. "Ugh, why must you be so stubborn?!? Submit! And let me be on my way!"

God eventually realizes the match is at a standstill, and so God does the only thing that will end it – God strikes Jacob in such a way as to dislocate his hip – it's the kind of blow that gets you a yellow flag and fifteen yards every time.

But guess what? It still doesn't end. Thinking he's disabled Jacob, God begins to walk away. Jacob bears-hugs God's legs, and refuses to let go. God says, "Dude, let me go!!! It's daybreak, we've been at this all night. I'm tired, and I need to get on my way. I've got places to go and people to see!"

Jacob says, "No way, Dude, not until you bless me!"

And every so slightly, you can see a little grin form on God's face. "Okay, what's your name," God says.

"Jacob."

"Not anymore. Now it's Israel, for you have striven with God and humans, and you have prevailed."

And believing he was playing with house-money, Jacob says, "Tell me your name."

God just smiles. "Why does everyone want to know my name – Don't they know I still keep some things to myself. You have seen my face. You have touched me. You have heard me. You have experienced me. And you have not only survived, but you have thrived. I'll give you something better than my name, I'll give you my blessing. Go now in peace, friend. I am with you!"

And so the standstill comes to an end. One man walks away with the blessing he's been promised. The other walks away with the mystery still intact.

Today's text is a strange one. It's both hopeful and unsettling at the same time. There's an awful lot to process.

God protects Jacob and blesses Jacob, and all of his descendants. As Christians, we claim that ancestry and the blessings that come with it. It's good to be the people of Israel. If are blessed, whom or what shall we fear? I like this text!

But this text is also unsettling. What kind of God seeks to dominate his people like a wrestler seeks to pin an opponent? And what kind of God must use chop blocks or slide tackles to defeat his opponents? What kind of God honors stolen birthrights and blessings? What kind of God chooses to bless one people group, but not another? And what if we're not one of those chosen people? Then what? Do I like this text?

We haven't the time this morning to declare this text wholly fulfilling or wholly unsettling. That's something we must each think about individually.

But here's what I will declare it: today's is a text worthy of our time and attention.

A wrestling match is a fitting metaphor for Israel's relationship with God in any age.

Friends, we are a stubborn people! We seek to wrap our arms around a God much, much bigger than ourselves. And in our rush to grasp God, or tame God, or name God – this rush to make God a tangible, precise, known quantity – we too often mischaracterize, or misinterpret, or minimize the vast and wide mercies and possibilities of our Maker.

As Douglas John Hall notes, "Often times, we think we have a hold on the truth of God. We've got it right here in our hands and you don't! But God's truth is not something that can be held. Instead, God's truth has a hold on each of us!"

We wrestle to understand the complexities of our God. We show a determination to be God's people (though admittedly, we do so better on some days than others). God notices that determination. God notices our stubborn desire to live in covenant. And God smiles. And God offers blessing. And even

when we fail to live into God's covenant, God remains our God. God offers us grace and love. And it seems to me this process continues each time the sun rises and sets.

The ancient writers called it a wrestling match – a match that'll leave you limping.

But when the sun rose over Penuel that day, Jacob crossed the Jabbok, and there he met his brother Esau. Esau embraced Jacob. The same God that had blessed Jacob, had also blessed Esau. Each man regained a brother. One offered apology. The other offered forgiveness. Both knew the peace of reconciliation. Both knew the blessings of God.

Friends, when we dissect a difficult text, we may come out of that process with a limp.

And when we cry out and fight tirelessly for the rights of those who are sick and hungry and poor and imprisoned and disenfranchised – when we live the words of Matthew 25, we may come out of that process with a limp.

And when we seek to live as the Acts community; when we love one another, and hurt one another, and forgive one another, and break bread once more with another, we may come out of that process with a limp.

But limping or not, the sun will rise over Sardis Baptist Church. And somewhere in that day is the presence of a good God who offers each of us a good blessing.

May it always be so!