

# Sermon

Sunday, November 25, 2018

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Genesis 32:22-32, John 8:31-38

*Wrestling with God*

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One of the most exciting moments in football takes place before the game even starts, when the players run out of the locker room and take the field. I remember in high school the joy and comradery of running onto the field with my teammates. However, one game I also remember my youngest sister wandering into the path of the team. She was about seven years old, doing cartwheels near the end zone, when all of a sudden she looks up and sees fifty guys sprinting toward her. A look of terror on her face. Fortunately, the team was able to avoid her, but still, she was traumatized.

In today's Gospel Project passage it's easy to imagine Jacob having that same look of terror on his face. Because here, in Genesis 32 Jacob is told that his brother Esau is coming to meet him...with 400 men. So not just *one* football team. *Eight* football teams. And Jacob probably thinks he's going to die. Why might Jacob think this? Because the last words out of Esau's mouth, back in chapter 27, were 'I will kill my brother Jacob.' If you remember, Jacob had swindled Esau out of his inheritance and out of his father's blessing. And so for the last 20 years Jacob has been on the run, living with his uncle, hundreds of miles from Esau.

But finally Jacob is returning home. He's worn out his welcome with his uncle, and God himself has told Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers...and I will be with you.' And so here he is on the banks of the Jabbok river, terrified at the prospect of meeting his brother.

My friends, have you ever been in a place of terror? Where you're facing something and can't see the way out? Perhaps like Jacob it's some sin in your past and the chickens are coming home to roost. Or perhaps it's something God had led you to, but now that you're there it seems overwhelming. In either case, what do you do? How do we face terrifying things?

Well Jacob is a cunning sort of fellow, and so he schemes to save his neck. First he divides his camp in two, thinking that if Esau destroys one, the other may survive. And secondly Jacob sends all of his flocks ahead of him as a gift, hoping that 500 animals will appease his brother. And finally in verse 9 Jacob prays, 'for the Lord to deliver him out of Esau's hand.'

Have you ever done this? You ask God for help, but you also make contingency plans? Here Jacob demonstrates both faith, as well as his penchant for scheming.

And so night falls on the banks of the Jabbok river. And who knows what Jacob must have been thinking? Will this be my last night on earth? Will God hear my prayer? We don't really know what Jacob thought, because God doesn't give him time to think. Instead of a quiet evening of prayer, God steps out of the shadows and physically tackles Jacob, wrestling him to the ground. My friends, of all of the ways God could have encountered Jacob here, we never would have guessed this. You know, the fire of judgment for his years of scheming, maybe. Another vision of a stairway to heaven. Sure. But never, in a million years would I have guessed that an angel from God would physically wrestle with Jacob for hours on end.

So what in the world does this mean? Why is God getting so down and dirty? Well the answer seems to be wrapped up in the conclusion of the fight. The angel dislocates Jacob's hip with a mere touch, and then changes his name, from Jacob to Israel. The angel says, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.' So Jacob receives a disability and a new identity. And they're actually connected. You see, God has great plans for Jacob and knows that he must be transformed before entering the promised land. Jacob must learn to walk in the faith of his fathers, to be the patriarch of the tribes of Israel. To do this, Jacob must know God *personally* as his fathers did. And yet before this night there's no evidence that Jacob had ever even prayed. He'd always gotten by on his own abilities, to manipulate and deceive.

And so God brings Jacob to the end of himself. But astonishingly, God first allows Jacob to prevail in the wrestling match—he allows Jacob to experience Him in a personal way. *And I want to emphasize God's grace here.* Jacob deserved far worse than a dislocated hip. He truly was a scoundrel. He deserved God's wrath and judgment. But God graciously touches him *just enough* to dislocate his hip, to shatter his pride and self-sufficiency. And by the end of the night Jacob is reduced to a

broken man, weeping and clinging to the angel, begging for a blessing.

And *now*, finally, Jacob is ready to be the father of nations. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God' Jesus said. The Greek behind 'poor in spirit' conveys the poverty and helplessness of a beggar. This is the kind of person God can use for his kingdom. The apostle Paul writes in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, 'We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself...this was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.'

My friends, have you ever had your life put out of joint by God? Have you ever been brought to the end of yourself? I hate to say this, but in my own life, most of the growth I've experienced has been through suffering, as I've learned to surrender my self-sufficiency, and trust in God. And the crazy thing is that we don't always know if suffering is coming from God or from the devil. Henry Cloud notes that if a guy in a mask pulls you into a dark alley, takes out a knife, stabs you in the stomach, takes all your money, and leaves you in an unconscious state, you would call him a mugger. But if a different guy in a mask pulls you into a brightly lit room, takes out a knife, cuts open your stomach, takes all your money, and leaves you in an unconscious state, you call him a doctor and thank him for helping you. One is a mugging, and the other is surgery. My friends suffering is a lot like that. Some is destructive and some is life-saving and we can't always tell the difference between the two. The one thing we *can know* is that God will use *all* suffering for good, if we let him and surrender all.

I'm reminded of the life of Louis Zamperini. An incredible athlete and Olympic runner, Zamperini joined the Air Force in WWII and was shot down in the Pacific. After surviving 47 days on a life raft, he was captured by the Japanese and endured 2 horrific years as a POW. To give you an idea of how bad it was, Japanese prison camps were 37 times more lethal than those of the Nazis. And yet, somehow against all odds, Zamperini survived. Like Jacob, he was able to prevail in almost any situation. And yet after the war life was different. Zamperini's business ventures failed. He became an alcoholic. His wife was on

the verge of leaving him. And every night he was tormented by nightmares and flashback from the war.

But then, in 1949, he attends a Billy Graham crusade. He walks up the aisle, surrenders all, and gives his life to Christ. From that moment on, Zamperini would never have another flashback. He would be free of alcoholism. And he would devote the rest of his life to telling people about the God who saves. Zamperini, like Jacob, was an apparently unbreakable man, but it was only after being broken and surrendering all, that he was able to find the peace and joy he always wanted.

My friends, I don't know what you're facing in your lives. Bloodthirsty brothers, dark secrets from your past, addictions, nightmares, whatever. I don't know what you're wrestling with. But I do know God's heart for you. He does not want to destroy you. He wants to save you. From your sin and self-sufficiency. As with Jacob, God doesn't want to punish us like we deserve. Instead He wants to bless us, to give us new identities, and to lead us into His land of promise. How do I know this? That God is for you and not against you? Because of another dark night many years ago, when another man wrestled with God. This man also stared death in the face and was overwhelmed by the prospect. And like Jacob he also prayed desperately, '*Please let this cup pass from me. Deliver me O God!*' But unlike Jacob, Jesus' prayers were not answered. And so whereas Jacob was treated with *grace*, not getting what he deserved, God poured out the full fury of his justice upon his only Son. And whereas Jacob declared, 'I have seen God face to face and my life has been delivered' Jesus, *looking* for God's face, cried out, 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me.' Whereas Jacob walked away with a hitch in his gate, Jesus was carried away with a hole in his side. Whereas Jacob was blessed to be a blessing to the nations, Jesus bore the curse of all the sins of all the peoples of the earth. Yes, Jesus took the place of all of us Jacobs. All of us who strive to accomplish our *own* agendas and succeed on our *own* terms. Jesus took the judgment we deserved, so God could lavish his grace and blessing on us.

My friends this is why we can trust God and surrender all. Because He has already surrendered everything for us in Jesus Christ. And so as we face our own terrors and wrestle with our own disjointed lives. May we cling to the one who has called us His own, who has given us new identities and made us His children, who welcomes us with open arms, and beckons us even now, into the land of promise. To him be the glory, now and forever.

My friends, today is Jubilee Sunday. It's a Sunday when we celebrate God's faithfulness. That he is a God of new beginnings. As he transformed Jacob he can transform us. As he rescued Louis Zamperini, he can rescue us. And so once a year at St. Michael's we set aside a little bit of time, maybe 15 minutes or so, simply for us to seek God's face in prayer. And so you can use this time to

be still in your pew and know that He is God. You can worship Him with the quiet music. And you can also receive prayer from your brothers and sisters in Christ. You've probably noticed the balloons. They identify prayer stations. During this time we're going to have prayer stations throughout the sanctuary. At these stations there are going to be clergy, their wives, and our trained prayer ministers. Simply available to pray *briefly*—2-3 minutes—for you and yours. And so I'd urge you to come up for prayer as individuals, even as entire families. Where are those places where you're hurting, where you're afraid, where you're stuck, where you're longing for more, where you need a new beginning?

My friends, this morning as we gather in Jesus' name, we know that he is mighty to save, and that His timeless invitation is 'Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will refresh you.' And so in that assurance let us now turn to Him in faith and prayer: Holy Father, we thank you for your presence with us this morning, that you are for us and not against us and that you call us into the promised land. And so we ask you to pour out your Holy Spirit upon us. That you would cleanse every sin and heal every hurt. By the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, set us free from old patterns and identities. Give us grace. And so come Holy Spirit. Move among us now and make all things new. We pray in your holy name.