

A Limp and a Blessing

Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Hymn: "When in the Hour of Deepest Need" (LSB 615)

The account of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok is a weird text. Maybe the fact that it's wrestling makes its weirdness a little easier to swallow. I wouldn't consider myself a fan but, once upon a time, on many a Saturday night sat transfixed in front of the television watching the likes of Rowdy Roddy Piper, Junkyard Dog, and Ric Flair. Part of the reason we watched it was that it's weird—guys flying off the top rope, smashing chairs on their opponent's head, launching their opponents out of the ring. Weird.

Genesis 32 is weird in a different way, but it still ranks pretty high on the weird scale. Jacob lies down for a nap at the ford of a river, the Jabbok, and then we're told that some man—that's all we know at this point—comes along and picks a fight with Jacob. Jacob is never one to turn down a fight, and these guys grapple *all night*. A seminary classmate wrestled in high school. He said that after a nine-minute match—that's regulation plus one overtime—he threw up. If nine minutes is an eternity to a trained wrestler, how impressive is it that Jacob and this man wrestle *all night long!*

At the end of it, the sun rises and this man uses some sort of ninja move and touches Jacob's hip and puts it out of socket. Jacob now walks with a limp presumably for the rest of his life. And to top it off, before the thing is completely over, Jacob demands a blessing. That is not usually the way a wrestling match would end. The Iron Sheik didn't demand a blessing from Hulk Hogan before releasing him from his famous "Camel Clutch."¹ Weird stuff. A wrestling match, all night, broken hip, a blessing.

¹ Again, please don't think me a fan because I'm able to drop their names.

To get a handle on what exactly is going on here and what this wrestling match by a river possibly has to do with you and me, we have to back up a little bit. You see, when Jacob lies down on this side of the river by himself, on the other side of the river is his brother Esau: his brother Esau whom he has not seen in some twenty years; his brother Esau whom the Bible describes as big and hairy and mean as opposed to Jacob who is smooth and scrawny (Gn 27:11); his brother Esau who, the last time Jacob saw him, was fuming mad, looking to kill Jacob because Jacob had just schemed and cheated Esau's birthright away from him. We remember the business of the fresh game and the goatskins. He had cheated Esau out of first place, which is basically Jacob's whole story—he's been the master manipulator, the schemer, the one who's always trying to control things just right to get ahead, and this has been true of Jacob even *before* day one. Jacob in the womb grabbed his fraternal twin Esau's heel so he could be the first one (Gn 25:26). (That's why they named him "Jacob," which means something like "grabber" or "grasper.")

So, at this point in the story Jacob is terrified because it's seemingly time for the chickens to come home to roost. Jacob hears that Esau is coming to greet him, more that he's heard that Esau, who is big, hairy, and mean, is coming with 400 big hairy friends, a veritable army, to meet him, and Jacob doesn't know what he's going to do. Jacob has decided to divide all his family and possessions into two camps, so, worst case scenario, Esau smashes only one of them. He's sent waves of bribes across the river to soften up his brother, still trying to work the system, scheme things, so that somehow he might weasel and manipulate and plan his way out of this trouble. And it's

It's kind of like when a dad wrestles with his little boy. For a while the son thinks, "I've got him. I'm going to win this time." And the boy just won't quit until finally the dad, who's got other things to do, exerts his dad strength and it's over. That's kind of how it is with this man, *who is God*, saying, "That's enough. You're not in control of this one." He touches his hip. He puts it out of joint, so that for the rest of his life Jacob would walk with a limp, a little hitch, a little pain with every step, to remind him of the match with that opponent that he was not in control of. To remind him that he can't fix everything. He'd walk with a limp for the rest of his life, which probably had him bumping into things and people here and there and maybe even falling flat on his face once in a while. He walked with a limp.

Some of you walk with a limp. You may not have picked it up in a wrestling match with God. But you've got your limps nonetheless. Some people like to say, "Time heals all wounds," but people who have been wounded deeply know that's hardly the case. A soldier who lost his legs in Afghanistan might learn to cope with that wound, but he won't get his legs back. And the same is true of you and your wounds. Maybe they're the ones you got because you were not loved the way you should have been by the people who were supposed to love you, so you walk with a limp. Or you're carrying some heavy baggage you picked up because you put yourself in a place you wish now you had never gone. Or you carry all this grief with you over something or someone that everyone else seems to have gotten over, but you haven't. You still limp. And maybe that limp causes you to bump into people or causes you to fall flat on your face every once in a while.

at that point that he lies down by the river for what he thinks might be a night of sleep but instead it turns into a wrestling match with, well, we'll get to the with-whom later.

First we might stop and ask where we find ourselves in a story like this, if we can relate in any way to this master manipulator Jacob, the schemer, the organizer. He pretends to be someone he isn't in order to get his major blessing, which is probably something to which we can relate. We all pretend to be something other than we are.

Then he's this captain of control. Every aspect of his life is taking the bull by the horns, trying to make sure everything is just right so that he can get ahead. We may resonate with that. We think if we can just get control of the things and the people in our lives, then finally things would fit together. In reality it isn't so true. Oh, we can make a little bit of progress (with Marie Kondo's help) in terms of organizing our closet or (maybe with Supernanny's help) the dinner table, but when it comes to the bigger things, the old hang-ups, the people you drive crazy and the people that drive you crazy, when it comes to the terrifying things, the big, hairy, mean monsters that keep you up at night, you don't know those things and you don't control them. Which is at least one of the points of this weird wrestling match.

Jacob, for all his efforts at scheming and grabbing and planning, is about to face the terrifying thing in his life: Esau across the river. He can't control Esau. What's going to happen there? Just at this point, the one thing he cannot master, he meets this man who picks a fight with him, who wrestles with him all night, because this man wants Jacob to realize that he's not going to win this one. He can't win every battle. But Jacob is too headstrong, so the man has to touch his hip. "You don't control this one."

We all walk with a limp. We don't often see it. The rest of us sometimes have to look really closely to see it, because part of the control thing we all suffer from is that we practice putting one foot ahead of the other so no one sees the little hitch in our step. But we all have them. And so one of the things the Holy Spirit may be doing with this odd story of Jacob and the wrestling match is calling attention to our limps. He may additionally be calling attention to the fact that everybody else you meet in your life walks with a limp, too, which might lead you to be a little kinder to them. At the very least, though, it draws attention to your own limps and forces you to think about what it says about you and your world.

Every step Jacob took his whole life was a reminder to him that he was not in control but that he had wrestled with the One who is. I know that our wounds and our limps and the way we came to have them are in many cases horrible and we wish the things that gave us those limps never happened. But even still God uses them to point us to Him. Saint Paul had a limp. He called it his thorn in the flesh, a limp, a wound, something that he carried with him that he wished wasn't there. On multiple occasions he cried out to God and said, "Straighten my leg. I'm sick of this limp. I'm sick of this thorn." And every time God said, "No, you're going to keep it. My power is made perfect in your weakness." Somehow a limping Paul is a better Paul because a limping Paul knows he lives by the grace of Jesus (2 Cor 12:1-10).

We all have our limps. I have my own limps even though I am very practiced at hiding them from most people. I wish they weren't there. Maybe someday they will not be there. For now they are. And for a whole lot of us "for now" may be a very long time.

The limps do remind me daily of how much I am not in control and how desperately I need Jesus and a so-gracious God who loves me, limps and all.

Which is kind of where things got left at the Jabbok for Jacob. When the sun rose, Jacob left with a limp. But that's not all he was left with. We're told he left with a blessing. "And there God blessed him." He went to meet Esau. He went to face the unknown, to meet the uncontrollable with two things: a limp and a blessing.

In a few moments, we're all going to stand up and you're going to watch me limp up here and say some words, "My body given for you," the "New Testament in my blood shed for you" and you'll be invited to join a long line of limpers, the walking wounded, who wrestle with God and with each other and with themselves. You'll limp your way up here, seeking a blessing, the body of Christ given for you, the blood of Christ shed for you. It will be a blessing but it likely will not fix your limp, but it will tell you that the One who wrestled for you all the way to the Cross will never let you be wrestled from His hands. It will tell you in a way so real that you can taste it, that Jesus is with you in your limping, and that He'll be with you, loving you, forgiving you, setting you straight, lifting you up when you fall because of that limp until the day when, as one person has put it, even the lame, even the limpers, will leap like a deer (Isaiah 35:6).

With a limp and a blessing. Amen.

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