

# **Sermon Text for May 1, 2016**

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II Timothy 3:14-4:5, Genesis 32:22-32

## ***“Wrestling with God”***

Our First Scripture today speaks to us about those sacred writings, what we call the Bible, that are able to instruct us for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Scripture and our understanding of its authority has always been a point of departure among the churches. How we understand the meaning of Scripture tends to divide Christians more than it unites them. That is certainly not what God had in mind. A few years ago we celebrated 500 years since the birth of John Calvin and here was someone who took Scriptures seriously. Luther departed from the Church of Rome over his interpretation of Scripture. That is why we are called Protestants because Luther, and we as his reformed descendants, are pro-testo, or for the book. We consider the Holy Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God.

Our text from Genesis today is from one of the most studied Scriptures in all of the Old Testament. It is also one of the most powerful. Last week we created the image of the church being on a swing leaning back, all the way back to Christ and then kicking forward to reach the lost for Christ. The week before we had the image of a ladder which was firmly planted on the earth and yet stretched into the heavens.

This week we are dealing with a completely different image and that is of a wrestler. Again Jacob is the protagonist and he is also one of the wrestlers fighting with a stranger whom he doesn't release until this person, who turns out to be God, blesses him. The church must be tenacious in speaking words of reform and being reformed otherwise it will lose its voice in this day and age. We cannot give up when we face challenges but we have to hang on furiously and not let go until we receive God's blessing. And we have received God's blessings and we will continue to. But the same is true also for us as individuals as we go through life. Let's learn how to wrestle a blessing from God.

There is a Jewish saying that goes “When a person has a clear conscience, everyone fears him, but when he has a guilty conscience, he fears everyone else.” Jacob is filled with fear and guilt in this passage that we have just read before he encounters God. He is currently running from Laban, and today he is also running from Esau. He hears from his scouts that Esau, his brother, the one from whom he had taken his

birthright and his blessing and whose last words we hear are I am going to track him down and kill him, his brother Esau, that brother is heading his way with 400 armed men.

Jacob does what any man would do in this situation. He sends his goods and his wealth, his family across the river toward Esau and then he goes back to get more sleep. If Esau were to come with malice in mind he would find Jacob's riches, then his family, before he got to him. It was somewhat of a cowardly act but he wanted to stay alive. Do you see that?

Once he is alone, Scripture states that it is then that he is most vulnerable. You often find that in times of crisis when all of the activity and business is over, it isn't until you are alone, by yourself thinking about what has just happened and what has to happen next, it is then that the feelings start to come upon you. You've been there. The kids are asleep and you're by yourself. Or as a single you get home from work and you are by yourself in the apartment. That is when you are the most vulnerable, the most alone. Scripture tells us he was alone, vulnerable, not necessarily sleeping as we often assume, but certainly alone.

There is a tremendous similarity with this scene of Jacob alone and someone else in a Garden facing his most difficult night of passion, alone, with friends who fall behind him sleeping, and in that loneliness he wonders if it is worth it all, take this cup from me. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemany wrestles with his certain painful future, but ends up by saying your will be done.

Jacob is facing his Garden of Gethsemany. Frederick Buechner calls this the magnificent defeat of Jacob. This wrestling match is a magnificent defeat because at the end of it Jacob walks away, or better yet he limps away that morning having changed in two dramatic ways. This encounter that Jacob has with God changes him, reforms him forever. God remains the same, but Jacob changes.

How is Jacob changed, how is he reformed by this encounter with God and what can we learn from his reformation to apply to us today as we seek the face of God, and seek to be reformed by an encounter with God? When Jacob is alone a man wrestles with him. He doesn't attack him or even try to kill him but merely wrestles with him. In fact when Jacob seems to be more of a match than the man expected he hits Jacob on the hip and throws it out of socket. When you read this your immediate reaction is that he was fighting dirty. Almost like Mike Tyson biting off the ear of Hollyfield or George Brett

using a tarred bat. Or Tom Bracy deflating the footballs. It just wasn't fair. But Jacob isn't phased and continues to wrestle and hang on.

Finally it seems the man is finished and he wants to go, but Jacob won't let him. Jacob is then changed, his name goes from Jacob, the usurper, to Israel: God perseveres. You have to understand the importance of Jacob having his name changed and what a blessing that was. When Jewish people got really sick their families used to change their names and call them by a different name so that death would not find them. A name to the people of God meant everything so when it was changed it signified a complete transformation and reformation. Shakespeare may have said: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet."

That may be true for Shakespeare but in Scripture one's whole person is wrapped up in the name. From Abram to Abraham and Saul to Paul, now Jacob the usurper becomes Israel, God perseveres. Jacob was changed.

A second way was that Jacob walks away from the wrestling match limping. Like Prometheus he is able to face God's challenge and win, but because of this close encounter Jacob leaves wounded, limping, changed. It is far better than having eagles come every day and eat your guts out, but it was painful nevertheless. When Jacob encounters God, he receives a blow that weakens him. When we come to this place, we should be looking to be reformed, changed or even God forbid wounded because we recognize our sin and our inadequacy before God so we go home limping. This is what an encounter with God is supposed to do. Jacob enters the world holding onto the heel of his brother refusing to let go, struggling to be first. Today he enters his new life wrestling with God, not letting God go until God blesses him.

One of the main complaints that Christians have in their walk over time is that their faith becomes stale. A phrase I have heard often is that they feel that they are just going through the motions. They have fewer and fewer encounters with God. When they read Scripture it becomes more and more elusive and confusing. As we made our way through the 90 Day Challenge we tried to reclaim the joy of reading Scripture, and I think for the most part it worked. This is why we are going to do it again at the end of May, the 90 Day Challenge II.

Today, Jacob encounters God, he sees the face of God and survives for one reason. He refuses to let go, he refuses to give up. If your faith isn't exciting any more, then you need to wrestle with God because your relationship with Jesus Christ is the most

important thing in your life. Don't allow the staleness to overcome the excitement that you once felt or that others around you feel.

Last week we spoke about allowing ourselves to lean back, into the arms of Christ, but then kick forward in order to be relevant in a postmodern world. Today, as I have said, we have an opportunity to reach more people for Christ than ever before. You know in Chinese the character that means opportunity is the same for danger. We have an opportunity to wrestle with God, but it is dangerous, you might get your hip thrown out of place or your pride wounded.

But Jacob teaches us to persevere, and to hang on until we catch a glimpse of God's blessing. This isn't for the meek. I've found that if you sit on the fence or straddle the middle of the road you are likely to get hit by traffic coming from both directions. Today we are going to learn how to be reformed through the power and presence of Jesus Christ, and we do it by holding onto God and never letting go, even if you feel a distance between you and God.

The opportunities around us are enormous. You realize that this is the first time in history that one person, or a small, very small group of people have as much power as government used to in the past. With this power in individuals there is a whole lot of wrestling going on and usually people aren't wrestling to find God's presence in the fray, but are wrestling with each other. As a single church it is time we join the fight in this community to actually wrest away souls from Satan who has been at work much longer and harder than we have in this community.

For the first time in history authority figures aren't needed any more to gather information. I grew up in the old school where I was a small jug and I went to college and graduate school in order for the big jugs, my professors, to fill me with information and some day I hoped to become what? A big jug. Well today our kids don't need the big jugs to gather information. Through the internet they are able to be as informed, and I would even argue probably better informed about what is happening around them than we are. What our world needs are people who will be willing to interpret and assess the information that our children gather in their experiences which tend to be experiences that they have on their own.

Finally we are living in a time when our children are actually authority figures in their own right. How many of you own a cell phone that was programmed by your child? How many of you still need help from your child to send an attachment, or open one up?

Today if you want to insult someone you call him a vidiet. In the words of Bob Dylan, the times they are a changing. Our children are authority figures in numerous fields.

Jacob was living in a time of transition, but he hung onto God with all of his might. The flower fades, the grass withers, but the word of the Lord lasts forever. Brothers and sisters, hang on, allow Scripture to guide and direct you. Reform yourselves and then those around you, insist upon receiving a blessing from God, then go your way celebrating because you have seen the face of God and survived. Amen.