

“A Night with No Sleep”
Genesis 32:22-31
24th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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I’m going to begin this morning by asking you to consider a word with me.

The word is “river”.

What do you think of when I say the word “river”?

Maybe some of you are thinking of great literature, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. How Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River together, and under the guise of a children’s book, Mark Twain exposes and critiques the racism of 19th century America.

What do you think of, when I say: “river”?

Did anyone play in a river when you were a child?

What about in the Bible?

If we’re talking about rivers, what do you think of in the Bible?

There’s that beautiful river in Revelation 22, the river of the water of life...

There’s the River Jordan, where Jesus was baptized by John.

There’s the Nile River, where the baby Moses was rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter.

And then there’s the Jabbok River.

I’d like to invite you to come with me to the Jabbok River, and if you do...you’re going to meet someone.

The first person you're going to meet is Jacob.

You remember the story of Jacob, right?

Back in the earlier chapters of Genesis, Jacob swindled his brother Esau out of both birthright and blessing, all of which meant Esau wanted to kill him.

So Jacob flees from his home.

He finds shelter with his uncle Laban.

He's married, he starts a family...the years go by.

Twenty years later, God commands Jacob to return to his kindred, so Jacob must face his brother once again.

That's where we are when Jacob arrives at the Jabbok.

How do you think Jacob feels about meeting Esau again??!!

The Bible tells us that when Jacob hears that Esau has 400 men coming with him, Jacob was "greatly afraid and distressed."

To put it another way:

At the Jabbok River, Jacob is at a crossroads.

At this moment, Jacob's life can go either way...

Do you know what that's like?

Have you ever had a moment in your life when you were scared, and desperate, because your future could go either way?

I recall my father telling me about the time he was 11 or 12, perhaps.

He went out for a swim, not in a river, I think it was a lake.

But he went out too far.

And there was no way he could make it back.

Fortunately, a lifeguard noticed him, or I wouldn't be standing before you today!

This lifeguard swam out and rescued my dad, saved his life that afternoon.

I've heard this story a few times from my father, and whenever I hear it, I can still hear the echo in his voice of that 12-year-old's fear, that desperation, that knowledge that you are dependent on someone else, and your life can go either way...

What was it William Faulkner once wrote?
"The past is never dead. It's not even past."
 How true for Jacob.

Jacob isn't drowning this morning.
 But his life is on the line.

His past has finally caught up with him, and Jacob...is afraid.

This is why I'd like to invite you to come with me to the Jabbok River this morning.

Not just to meet Jacob.
 I'd also like you to consider YOUR fears.
 Consider what it's like when you are afraid, and you turn to God, feeling helpless in those fears.

In verse 9, Jacob prays:

“O Lord...Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him...”

How will God RESPOND to Jacob’s prayer??

Will God step in and rescue Jacob, like that lifeguard who rescued my dad?

The preacher John Claypool once suggested there are THREE PRIMARY WAYS that God helps us in times of need.

One way is through miracle—breaking into our finite lives with infinite love and inexplicable power.

A second way is through endurance—God does not solve our problem or prevent our pain, but instead gives us the strength and persistence we need to endure....to walk through the valley of the shadow and come out on the other side.

And yet a third way is COLLABORATION.

Not everything is up to God, not everything is up to us.

We’re both in it together.¹

I’m glad you’ve come to the Jabbok River this morning, because I think God responds to Jacob in all three of these ways.

First—the miracle.

Jacob is by himself, and what happens?

A mysterious figure, a stranger, wrestles with Jacob until daybreak.

Who is this wrestler?

The text does not tell us.

¹ John Claypool, “The Hopeful Heart,” New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003.

The stranger in this story is a very ambiguous figure—but it's safe to assume there is SOMETHING OF GOD in this stranger, for Jacob says of him: "...I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Jacob receives the miracle of God's presence that night.

But I wonder if he ever imagined that God would come to him...as a WRESTLER!

Do you know anything about wrestling?
I never wrestled in high school or college.
That was not my sport.

My father went out for the wrestling team when he was a freshman in college. He said it was the most EXHAUSTING sport he'd ever been a part of...do you know how long a wrestling match between two competitors lasts?

First period is three minutes.
Second period is two minutes.
Third period is two minutes.

Then there's the possibility of overtime...but the whole thing takes, AT THE LONGEST, somewhere between 7-10 minutes...

So think about what Jacob did that night.
He did not wrestle for 10 minutes.
He and that stranger wrestled ALL NIGHT LONG...

Do you see what God was giving Jacob?

Not just the miracle of God's presence...but the gift of endurance.
If you read on in Genesis, Jacob NEEDED that endurance.

Take a look at what happens to Jacob **after** that night at the river!

- In chapter 35, Jacob loses his wife Rachel during childbirth.
- In chapter 37, Jacob's sons sell their younger brother, Joseph, to some Midianites. Then they LIE about it to their father, tricking Jacob into believing that his beloved son, Joseph, is dead!

I'd like to invite you to the Jabbok this morning, but I think some of you have been there before...

Have you ever wrestled with God, struggled with your fears, spent many a sleepless night...and the gift that God left you with was not a speedy solution to your problems...but endurance?

The gift of simply putting one foot in front of the other, no matter what the world is throwing at you?

See, this isn't just a story about Jacob at the Jabbok.
This is a story about all our journeys to the Jabbok.

Many of you are familiar with the Jesuit priest, Greg Boyle.

Years ago, Boyle was set to baptize a young man named George. It was a big day for George. He used to be in a gang, but now his life was turned around.

The days of guns and violence....gone.
He had just gotten his GED earlier that day.
New life. New possibility.
Boyle was set to baptize him into the Christian faith.

Unbeknownst to George, the night before his baptism, his brother Cisco was walking home, half a block from his apartment, when a rival gang shot Cisco dead.

George did not yet know this as he received his GED the next morning, as he came racing up to Father Boyle, excitement and pride in his eyes.

But Boyle knew.

Boyle had received the news the night before.

Boyle barely slept, he was so afraid of what George might do when he found out...

So Gregory Boyle baptized George.

And then, after the service, he went for a walk with George. Quietly, gently, he told George that Cisco had been shot and killed the night before.

Well, the grief was real and it was raw. Immediately, George sat down and broke down and wailed and wept and wept. But what Boyle noticed about this moment is that the grief was ALL that was there.

See, Boyle had been in these situations before. And usually, it was not just grief. Usually, you couldn't see the grief, because there was RAGE.

There was HATRED. There was REVENGE.

There was a vow to even the score,
because that's what you do if you're in a gang.

Boyle was STUNNED—there was none of that in George.

It was as if the baptism had already, miraculously taken hold.²

That's what happens when we go to the Jabbok River with our fears...God gets a hold of us, and we are changed!

Jacob was changed, right?

He went to the Jabbok walking strong...and he left with a limp!
He went to the Jabbok with the name Jacob.
He left with a new name...Israel.

But it's not just Jacob's name that changed.
And it's not just Jacob's walk that changed.
Jacob became a new person at the Jabbok.

Why?
Because Jacob lost his fear!

Do you remember that fear that I asked you to locate,
the one that you carried to this worship service today?

It was the great theologian Karl Barth who once said,
"Do not fear the wrath of God; fear the love of God,
for the love of God will strip away everything
that stands between you and God."³

That's what happened to Jacob that night!
God stripped away his fear.

BEFORE this mysterious night, Jacob was always on the run:

² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

³ Quoted by Thomas G. Long in his sermon "Down by the River," as it appears in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2009.

Come to Jabbok this morning, and God won't just carry you.
God promises to change you.

I said earlier that there were THREE WAYS that God responds to us in our hour of need.

Miracle.

Endurance.

Collaboration.

That last one...I didn't get to that part of the sermon.
Collaboration means God working with us, in us, through us.
How you and I might be co-workers with God in this world...

I didn't get to that part of the sermon.

But that's ok.

You'll have a chance to work with God later today, or this week,
I'm sure—to be co-creators with God in our hurting and broken world.

But before you do, think for a moment—one more time—consider something you've been afraid of for quite a while...that fear that I asked you to locate, at the beginning of this sermon.

Do you have it in mind?

Good.

That's why I'm glad that you came with me to the Jabbok River this morning.

Because the Jabbok is NOT just a place for wrestling with God.
It's not just a place to confront our fears.
It's a place to receive God's blessing.

A blessing that helps someone get over their fears.
A blessing that turns a person into someone NEW.

You may think the blessing in our text was meant for Jacob.

The good news is that it's also meant for you.

Amen.