

“Limping”

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²²The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”

But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

(Genesis 32:22-31)

The stories of Jacob are among the most memorable in all of the Old Testament, probably because they are thoroughly human stories. Scripture does not disguise the fact that Jacob was a complex character. He was one of the great patriarchs, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, but he was also known for deceiving his father Isaac, cheating his brother Esau, and dealing shrewdly if not a bit dishonestly with his uncle Laban. Jacob was far from perfect. Despite these shortcomings, God chose Jacob and blessed him generously.

The story we read this morning is a great example of one of those imperfect, human situations that still result in God's blessing. A lonely and worried Jacob is sitting alone on the banks of the Jabbok River by a fire in the darkness. Just across the stream was the land of his brother Esau, who still held a mighty grudge against the younger brother who had cheated him out of his inheritance. Jacob had essentially been on the run ever since, but he could stay away from home no longer. He sent his family and the caravan of their possessions across the river ahead of him. But he stayed behind for one more night, apparently needing some time alone to collect himself and wrestle with his thoughts before he faced the music in the revealing light of day.

He ended up wrestling with more than his thoughts. In the night Jacob was visited by a challenger. Scripture identifies the adversary only as “a man.” Some say it was an angel. Others suggest Jacob was wrestling directly with God. It ended in what seems like a draw, although Jacob tenaciously holds on until he receives a blessing. But not before his opponent lands one final blow, knocking Jacob's hip out of joint. Jacob is granted the favor of heaven, but he leaves that place with an enduring scar – a painful reminder of his striving with God.

A few weeks ago, just before Molly and Kate were flying into Edinburgh to join us in Scotland, Stephanie and I decided to go ahead and travel a day or so before they were set to arrive. It was a beautiful sunny day, and we decided to spend the morning hiking up to Arthur's Seat, the highest of the three volcanic peaks in Edinburgh. The first part of the trail



is a paved path rising gently from a parking lot near the Palace of Holyrood House. We started out briskly. But around the first bend, the pavement end and the rocky climb begins. As the grade got steeper and the day got warmer, we realized that this was going to be a little more strenuous than we had anticipated. At times we needed handholds to scramble up the bumpy volcanic rock, especially for the final hundred yards to the summit. At the top, the views were spectacular.

After we took it all in, we started to make our way carefully back down the rocky trail. And that is when we realized that hiking boots would have been better than the running shoes we were wearing. The climb up was hard on the lungs; the climb down was hard on the legs, knees, and feet. With every step, gravity pushed our toes hard against the front end of our shoes. In the end, we were both glad we had made the journey. But by the time we walked into the café back at Holyrood House, I will admit it: our feet hurt, our legs ached, and we were limping.

I think that is why one detail from the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel is standing out for me this morning. There at the Jabbok, Jacob made it through the struggle, but it took a toll. He walked away from the episode limping in pain. That is often the case, isn't it, when we go through the challenges of life? We struggle our way through. We find a way to overcome, but it takes a toll on us physically, or emotionally, or both. I am confident that there are chapters in your life that follow this pattern. A challenge was hard fought, and you ended up walking away with a blessing... one that changed your life for the better. But you also left it a little bit bruised, with some kind of a limp. If that is the case, I have good news, because one of the spiritual lessons of this story is that these lasting limps are not all bad. In fact, they can help us keep our eyes on what is most important.

For example, the lingering pains we bear from life's challenges can remind us of the **value of experience**. Early in my adulthood, I got an odd patch of grey hair at the end of my part, on the right side. The rest of my hair was dark, so the spot was hard to miss. One time in my twenties, I remember being with a group of church people and an older member of the group just came right out and asked me about it. Whatever I said, he could tell I was a little sensitive about it. "I don't mention it because it is strange," he said, "but because I think it shows you are a deep thinker. You don't get a spot like that from being thoughtless and carefree. You get it from wrestling with big questions."

I never forgot that. That one comment helped me see that little gray spot in a new light. Before, I saw it mostly as an odd imperfection, but after that it became more of a reminder that every experience in life, even wrestling with the hard things, brings wisdom. Every experience adds to our understanding, our view of the world. Jacob's limp reminded him that the roller coaster of life is a complex gift, and every twist and turn – good and bad -- helps make us who we are.

Another thing I expect that limp did for Jacob was to **give him confidence**. His match with the angel was much more than everyday experience. This was a moment when, in the face of a mighty challenge, he rose to the occasion. Lesser people would have tapped out early in the contest, but Jacob held in there hour after hour, never taking a break. "I will not let you go," he told his adversary. The next morning he limped away from the scene, but he did so knowing that he never gave up... that he never quit... that he pressed on until the light of a new day had dawned. And the scars we bear from our struggles can do the same for us. They can remind us that we do have what it takes to persevere, to endure, to hold on and see something through.

Last but not least, a limp can be a **reminder of God's blessing**. That was, after all, what Jacob wanted. Jacob did not ask the angel for deliverance or escape from his brother. He did not ask to be delivered from consequences or to be whisked out of harm's way. He simply asked for God to be with him. He asked for the blessing of God's favor and mercy. He figured that, if he had that much, everything would fall into place as it should.

If you've ever seen any of the "Cars" movie franchise by Pixar, you will remember that the race car Lightning McQueen's best friend is an old rusted tow truck named Mater. In one of those movies, Mater is being asked to go undercover to help his friend, but there is a problem with the disguise. It wasn't fitting his chassis effectively due to the many dings and dents on it. The car helping him brings out a machine that could quickly buff out all the imperfections in just a few seconds, but Mater immediately flinches and pulls away. "For a second there I thought you were trying to fix my dents," he says.

"Yes, I was," the assistant replies.

"Well then, no thank you," Mater says. "I won't get those dents buffed, pulled, filled, or painted by anybody. They are way too valuable... I came by each one of them with my best friend. I don't fix these. I want to remember these dents forever."

The bruises, scars, and dents of our struggles can at times be painful. But if we view them correctly, they can be treasured reminders of how God has seen us through, day in and day out. There is no trial we will ever face perfectly. All of them will leave scrapes and pains – some visible, some invisible. But if we are able to hold on, hang tough, and make it through the struggle with perseverance and conviction, God will find a way to give you just the right blessing, the one you most need. And when that happens, those little limps that we carry forward are not so much reminders of pain, but reminders of the value of experience and the wisdom that comes from it... reminders that we have what it takes to survive, everything we need to do hard things... lasting memorials of the glorious view from the top of that mountain you were able to climb.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**