

TOUCHED by AN ANGEL

Sermon, August 2, 2020

Text: Selections from Genesis 32

A few of you may remember my parents married quite young; they actually eloped at the age of seventeen shortly after graduating from high school. It's a long story, but the short of it is that my mother's father received notice he was being transferred from Philadelphia to the moon ... actually, to Gary, Indiana, which my Dad says in the days before interstates and cheaper airfares may as well have been the moon ... so, my parents (rather impetuously) decided to go to Elkton, Maryland and get married October 28, 1950. My oldest brother came along August 5, 1951 (*he'll be 69 Wednesday*); I was their third child, born in their 21st year; three more children came later (*I think I told you Easter Sunday, with my youngest sister's March birthday, my mother now has six children all in their sixties, we all miss my dad who joined the ranks of the church triumphant in 2016*). One distinct advantage of having younger parents was the seemingly boundless energy they had when we were children. I remember when my two older brothers and I used to wrestle with my Dad ... we would have these rambunctious and vigorous and FUN bouts on the recreation room floor; one bout got so intense that Dad broke two toes accidentally kicking the sofa. When we would wrestle, he would let us prevail for a time, encouraging our best efforts ... then he would just get up and throw us around so easily, usually into a soft recliner or sofa, to remind us just who was "in charge." We did this quite frequently until we got too big for him, which happened around the time my oldest brother (*whose birthday is Wednesday*) entered 8th grade ... both brothers had joined the junior high wrestling team, and bouts with Dad became more intense. The bout that ended all bouts was when that oldest brother wound up cracking one of my father's ribs.

Those fond wrestling memories always come to mind for me whenever I read this story in Genesis 32. It's a bit of an odd story; we are not really told who the "man" is that Jacob is wrestling. It's a significant passage, as it is the account of how Jacob became Israel, but even Martin Luther commented, "*Every man holds that this is one of the most obscure (as in unclear, undecipherable) passages in the entire Old Testament!*" Perhaps the best starting point for understanding this passage is to be found in the Bible itself, both Jacob's comments at the end of the chapter and from Hosea 12:3-4 -- "*In the womb Jacob grasped his brother's heel; as a man he contended with God. He wrestled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.*" According to the prophet, this "man" with whom Jacob wrestled is an angel; Jacob is (*apparently*) convinced it was God. This angel, this divine emissary, theologians have speculated is likely a divine incarnation, a "B.C." appearance of God-in-the-flesh ... in short, Genesis 32 really is about Jacob wrestling with God (*one might say this is the original "W.W.F." ... not World Wrestling Federation, but Wrestling With the Father.*) A question that might be raised is, "*How could Jacob hold his ground with God in a wrestling match?*" Well, that's why this account reminds me of my dad. "Dad God" allowed Jacob to give Him his best ... and then displayed His superiority with a single touch. Seemingly without effort, as if He could have done it all along, with just a touch He dislocates Jacob's hip.

"*Touched by an Angel*" was a television miniseries that premiered on CBS September 21, 1994 and ran through April 27, 2003; the series sent CBS's ratings skyrocketing, affirming there really was an appetite for wholesome and uplifting television programming (*a lesson which producers never seem to learn, but that's another sermon*). The series starred Roma Downey as an angel named Monica, and Della Reese as her supervisor Tess. The basic storyline is that Monica is tasked with bringing guidance and messages from God to various people who are at a crossroads in their lives. Well, in the episode of "*Touched by THE Angel*" in Genesis 32, Jacob is certainly at a crossroads in his life. Only this angel isn't Monica, and has something of a rougher touch.

Some background: Jacob had accumulated a great deal of wealth and a very large family these past fifteen-plus years; you may remember he had to flee for his life from his brother, Esau, and traveled some five hundred miles away to his Uncle Laban's home in Haran, where he has now been for nearly two decades. We are told in Gen 31:3 God had spoken to Jacob and said, "*Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.*" So, God is sending Jacob back home, back home to face his fears, back home to face the brother he has cheated, back home to try to set things right with his wronged brother, back home to face the music. However, he was assured he wouldn't be going alone ... God promises to go with him. In other words, God is saying to Jacob, "*Go back to those you have cheated, go back to those you have hurt ... face them, make things right ... and I will be with you as you do so.*"

So, Jacob is heading back home to Beersheba. He doesn't get far before he hears his brother Esau is heading his way. Remember, Esau was the reason Jacob left home in the first place. The last words Jacob heard from Esau (*not directly, but second-hand*) were, "*I'm going to kill my brother,*" which is what Esau swore shortly after Jacob tricked Esau out of his inheritance by deceiving their blind old Dad (*see chapter 27*). So, when Jacob learns Esau is now riding toward him, accompanied by four hundred men, we are told that Jacob is (*understandably*) terrified! Nearly two decades he had been on the run from Esau. And now, he's afraid Esau is coming to finally carry out his threat.

Have you ever been really afraid? I mean more than the "*monsters under the bed*" or "*bumps in the night*" kind of frights ... I mean the kind of fear that just terrifies and paralyzes, the fear that gives you a sickening, heavy weight

of dread deep in your heart that says, *"I might not make it."* When you're really scared, it is hard to think about anything else. Maybe it was a bad medical diagnosis, or a phone call from an emergency room late at night, maybe it's you who was in the emergency room late at night with a terrifying medical event, maybe it was the sudden departure of a loved one you couldn't imagine living without. Or maybe it was an unexpected governmental dictate that rather arbitrarily determined your job, your livelihood, was unessential and you are now facing financial difficulty, bankruptcy, or even eviction from your home, an all too real event for tens of millions since last March.

Whatever it was, the fear created in you that sense of dread, foreboding and even terror that says, *"I'm not going to make it."* Well, that was Jacob, here at the shore of the Jabbok. And I'm sure his being alone only heightened the sense of fear and foreboding; after all, isolation is a most effective means of intimidation ... that's one reason why solitary confinement is a severe form of punishment. Our imaginations always run wilder when alone, perceived dangers and threats and problems just seem to magnify when we are isolated from the comfort and companionship of others; in short, it often breaks us. Just as a brief aside to relate to our current events: It's not that we just want to "party" as our governing officials seem to patronizingly imply; we are designed to crave companionship. It is not good for people to be alone. We are social creatures who need company and constructive activity and work and purpose. Human beings in general and Christians in particular are not designed, not created, to sit alone behind locked doors trembling in fear (*and/or endlessly watching Netflix*). And we wonder at the rationale that closed the schools and churches, but kept open the liquor stores and didn't disperse crowds of protesters. We read the U.S. Supreme Court recently said it was okay for Nevada to allow crowds of up to 50% of the building capacity to gather in the casinos, which can number in the hundreds of people, but no more than fifty people may gather in churches no matter what the size of the building. Justice Neil Gorsuch called out the apparent arbitrary duplicity in his dissent, writing, *"There is no world in which the Constitution permits Nevada to favor Caesar's Palace over Calvary Chapel."* And I could go on. Like Jacob, not a few of us worshipping here or on line this morning are at that Jabbok shoreline, and we feel so terribly alone as we wonder, *"Are we going to make it? Will we ever be able to shake hands again? Will we ever be able to travel again? Will we ever go back to work again? Will we ever be able to see people's faces again? Will we ever experience the warm touch of a firm handshake, the inspiration of a full church, the beautiful singing of a full choir, without being frightened by those in political office and/or the incessant (and often shrill) voices of the media into thinking we're risking our lives and the lives of others?"*

To be sure, as Jacob and all of us eventually discover, many of the difficulties in life are self-inflicted; often they come from decisions made out of our insistence to do things our way, which can lead to dreadful and fearful and lonely results. But not all our difficulties are self-inflicted. And especially now it just seems to be an incessant and constant drumbeat of woe and fear, fear, fear on every media source every day 24/7. OK, end of my little aside, other than to point out that some of our worse decisions are often made when we're afraid and alone.

It was out of his fear of Esau that Jacob sent pretty much all he owned, all he worked so hard to accumulate, on a great parade toward Esau in an attempt to appease him. Then Jacob even sent his family, so he really was alone. And he wasn't alone not just because he's all by himself; I think Jacob was alone in the way that all those who scheme and cheat and manipulate and use people wind up being alone. Jacob hasn't always been the most upright person, and now it looks to him that the consequences are coming home to roost. As night falls, Jacob is probably at the lowest point in his life. He is alone in the wilderness for what he fears will be his last night ... and it is and that's when this mysterious wrestling match ensues.

In a way, Jacob is literally coming to grips with his fears.

As Jacob wrestled all that long night, I don't think he even knew with what or whom he was struggling, he only knew that he would not let go until some good came of it! And by the way, that's commendable! Whatever we struggle with, don't give up and despair until some good comes out of it! In a way, this fight is the symbol of Jacob's life. He has been wrestling with God for a long time. Quite often the struggles and frustrations we have with our relationships, in our work, in our homes are, at root, struggles with God. And until we get that central struggle resolved, until we come to grips with God, we will never fully resolve the other struggles in our lives. In the course of the match, Jacob was got that divine but crippling Touch, blowing his hip out of joint. But still Jacob hung on, refusing to let go until he gets his blessing. In a way, this is the prime position of faith: broken, exhausted, and with hands that are empty enough to simply hold onto God. There's a sermon in itself here, but as Jacob found in a literal sense, when you genuinely come to grips with God, you might never walk the same way again!

At daybreak the blessing finally comes for Jacob in the form of a new name. His name is no longer Jacob. His name is now Israel. (*the name Israel means "those who struggle, or those who come to grips, with God."*) It took some years and many mistakes and a whole lot of fearful times to learn this, but Jacob found the blessings of life come not from scheming and conniving and grabbing for all he could get. He learned the blessings of life come not from *what* you are holding, but from *Whom* you are holding.

More to the point, Jacob learned blessings come from the One Who is holding onto him ... the One who promised early on that He would never, ever leave him alone.