

"Night Wrestling" A sermon based on Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121 and 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 delivered on October 19, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at The First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

You know when you drive into almost any town in America there is a sign saying, "Home of So-in-So who won a Gold Medal at the Olympics for their sport in a certain year." If night wrestling were an Olympic sport, then Jacob would have won the gold medal at the ford of the Jabbok River. Of course, he would also have made up his own rules, something for which his past life of trickery prepares us. For night wrestling by Jacob's rules, you would have to wrestle with a man who you could not see and did not know, and someone who would not tell you their name. Also, instead of the gold medal the person that you were wrestling with would give you a new name AND a dislocated hip!

This is not much like the spectator sports we normally watch on our televisions! But what has Jacob really won in this wrestling match that we read about in Genesis 32 this morning? It is clear that Jacob has reached a turning point in his life, which this wrestling match. The match happening at the ford of a river which strongly symbolizes this crossroads in his life. He has left his father-in-law, taking animals and slaves and children and maids and his two wives and, unbeknownst to him, his father-in-law's household God's thanks to his wife Rachel! And now, he must face his past. He must face his brother, Esau, from whom he stole the birthright.

This encounter feels somewhat like the encounter that Jacob had earlier in Genesis (28:10-17) when he slept with the pillow as a rock, the night he fled FROM his brother from Canaan to Paddan-aram. That night he encounters angels ascending and descending something like a ladder to heaven and the Lord blesses him and promises he will return to Canaan. Who can forget singing "We Are

Climbing Jacob's Ladder' from our Sunday School days! What Jacob receives at Bethel is what our Psalmist in Psalm 121 promises to all of us:

⁷The Lord will keep you from all harm—

he will watch over your life;

⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going

both now and forevermore.

What Jacob seems to have won here in Genesis 32 is not, although he does also receive a blessing like in Chapter 29, a battle of physical strength, but a second chance. The second chance he receives is much like the second chance he was promised at the foot of what we now call "Jacob's Ladder." But the Commentators have debated and argued over the years about whether the person that Jacob wrestles with on that night so long ago could be God, or an angel, or just an ordinary man.

The encounter at the ford of the Zabbok, then, when Jacob is in fear of his brother and what might transpire when they are reunited, is similar to the earlier encounter, but with a major difference. As Rev. Callie Puket-Brewster states it:

"This encounter with the divine is more unsettling and mysterious than the first one. In the earlier narrative, there is no hint of conflict, and the divine being involved is clearly identified as YHWH . . . The identity of the being in Genesis 32 is ambiguous. . . . The closest the narrator comes to asserting anything about his identity, however, is in verses 29 and 30, where he is implicitly referred to as an *elohim*, but even this designation does not clarify matters much. *Elohim* is a fairly generic term that can refer specifically to YHWH, of course, but can also refer to divinities in a more general sense. The NRSV translates *elohim* as "God" in both verses, but it is by no means obvious that Jacob's opponent is God for why should YHWH fear the light of day as this *elohim* seems to do, and why should YHWH need to ask Jacob his name?" (Working Preacher, October 20, 2019)

In that symbolic sense then, what Jacob was wrestling with at Jabbok was the divine principles within himself which he had long neglected. His successful wrestling match prepared the way so that Jacob could, with a heightened sense of ethics and morality and with a divine blessing under his belt, be able to meet his brother, Esau (AND his 400 men!), whom he had so wronged, and make peace instead of war. The wrestling match took away the need to fight any other battle—it acted as a surrogate battle, in which everyone wins and the only evidence that it happened was that Jacob--now Israel--has to limp home to Canaan and into a new era in his and Israel's life. So, in short, it doesn't seem to matter who won the wrestling match, for what Jacob gains in the match is a new beginning, a new identity. This new identity is symbolized by a new name, Israel. So, Jacob gets a second chance and so do the people that his new name represents, the people of the nation of Israel, who all also receive a second chance at the same time.

There are implications for the church here, as it limps forward through this time of deep unrest, government shutdown, and major political and civil strife. There are about 1600 years between Genesis and the second letter of Paul to Timothy, his ministerial protégée, and yet his words are timeless for the church. He reminds Timothy in verse 16 of this morning's reading, that; *“¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”* As we and the church face all of these ambiguities, we need to be taught, rebuked, corrected and trained for righteousness.” In this difficult time we need to remember to return to the Bible—to read God's word as “the breath of God” and listen for that breath, the Holy Spirit, to guide us. I didn't plan this sermon as an advertisement for our Bible Study here, but I guess it is. It has been a real gift to me as your Pastor to sit with church folk and wrestle with God's word

and the Good News of Jesus Christ. It has been 1958-1961 years since Paul wrote to Timothy, and the reading is still as fresh in meaning as it was back then!

Next Saturday we begin a new session on the Book of Exodus. The stories in the Bible are exciting and full of all our human joys, woes, testing, and difficulties. To grapple with them, as Jacob did at the ford of the Zabbok River, is a great privilege and imminently faith-building. Come and join us from 10:00 to 11:30 each Saturday morning!

And finally, it is my hope that perhaps a sign was erected on the outskirts of Canaan to greet Jacob as he wandered home. A sign that commemorated his “olympic” wrestling match with that *elohim* that was able to give him an identity adjustment as well as a hip adjustment! Amen.

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