

“Limping”

Genesis 32:24-31 & Matthew 14:13-21

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Our scriptures today have several positive, uplifting, nice messages. I have preached some of these here in the past. Today we are going to plunge into the pain, despair, and questions. Warning this sermon is raw. You will probably leave with more questions than answers. Hopefully, it will help you to keep limping when tragedy strikes.

Scripture proclaims, **Genesis 32:22-31 NLT** “**This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the man said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” “What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.” “Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.” “Please tell me your name,” Jacob said. “Why do you want to know my name?” the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel (which means “face of God”), for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.” The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip.”**

There is a tremendous amount of context that helps us understand this scripture. We only have time for a concise summary today. God made a covenant with Sarah and Abraham to bless them, then they were to bless all people. Their descendants were to be a great nation. Infertility plagued them. Out of desperation Abraham fathers Ishmael with an Egyptian servant girl. In the future, the tables get turned and Abraham’s descendants are slaves of the Egyptians. Sarah and Abraham’s desperate impatience started the feud. Later they have Isaac. It is no surprise that Sarah and Hagar are jealous and resentful. Ishmael feels betrayed. For 13 years he was groomed as the chosen child of blessing that would inherit everything, become a great nation and bless everyone. Now all of that shifts to Isaac, so Isaac and Ishmael have an intense sibling rivalry. The conflict becomes so intense that Abraham banishes Hager and Ishmael to die in the dessert. God ever graceful intervenes saving Hager and Ishmael and explaining that both Ishmael and Isaac will become great nations. The hurt and hatred within this family grows. God ever graceful never revokes God’s promise. God will continue to bless this family hoping to bless all people. Isaac marries Rebekah. After another long battle with infertility, she is pregnant with twins, Esau and Jacob, who fight in her womb. Rebekah asks God about this. **Genesis 25:23 And the Lord told her, “The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.”** Their rivalry is the continuation of the Sarah verses Hagar, Isaac verses Ishmael feud. The family dysfunction gets worse. Isaac’s favorite is Esau, who he loves. Rebekah’s favorite is Jacob, who she loves. Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage is a mess. Rebekah helps Jacob deceive Isaac by stealing Esau’s birth right. Jacob flees and is estranged from his family. Jacob fathers a great nation which in time will become the 12 tribes of Israel. Esau marries a daughter of Ishmael and fathers a great nation which in time will become the 12 Arab tribes. In these 4 generations, one sees the root of most wars and the strife between Islam, Jews, and Christians.

At the time of our scripture Jacob and Esau have not spoken or seen each other since Jacob stole Esau’s birth right. Esau’s tribe is larger and can easily kill Jacob’s tribe. The last words Jacob heard from Esau were spoken right after Jacob stole Esau’s inheritance. Esau threatened to kill Jacob.

In desperation and fear Jacob prays, begs, argues, wrestles with God. God is pure love, joy, and grace. We often project our baggage, hurt, and misconceptions onto God. Jacob wrestled with men all his life. Jacob wrestled with his Father who loved his brother Esau but had little to do with him. Jacob wrestled with his brother, that great hunter, who seems to be able to do everything better than him. Jacob wrestled with the pain and hatred between his father and uncle Ishmael and grandpa Abraham. Jacob wrestles with all of this pain, projecting it onto God. God is grace, breaking through the pain with blessing and forgiveness. The grace and blessing is realized, but the scars remain and a limp.

Susanna Metz wrote, “I imagine we all feel like this sometimes. When we wrestle with God (or sometimes the angels), don’t we feel as if our whole body cries out in weariness, pain, maybe fear? We may wrestle with choices—do we make this or that decision regarding our life’s work? We may wrestle with relationships—do we marry, do we forgive, do we repair damaged relationships? We may wrestle with basic faith—is there really a God, does God truly love us and care for us, can we rely on God’s promises? We are surrounded with distractions in our world. The practice of religion is no longer a priority in the eyes of the world, and we wrestle with the incongruities that bombard us every day. Did God pound Jacob’s hip out of joint or was it Jacob’s own strength giving way to God’s greater power? Is that why, instead of anger at his adversary, Jacob blessed that holy place with an altar and a new name? When our self-willed strength gives way to God’s greater power, perhaps our aching hearts and souls will build an altar, give our sacred space a new name—and then we will rest in the compassionate and healing heart of God.”

Wrestling with God transforms us. This side of heaven we are incapable of fully comprehending God, so God may seem to us like a man when God is far above gender. It may seem like God is fighting with us when God is actually pulling our burdens from us. It may seem like God is hurting us, dislocating our hip, when God is healing us. Through all the misconceptions, Jacob kept wrestling with God until he experienced the grace, healing, and blessings of God. Jacob was transformed. Jacob hated his brother and family. He languished in guilt over his mistakes, including stealing his brother’s inheritance. He was exhausted from running from his problems. Jacob’s wrestling match with God transformed him for when he sees his brother he proclaims. **Genesis 33:10 NRSV “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”** The change is so profound that Jacob’s name is changed to Israel. Perhaps in our wrestling with God we break ourselves, making space for God’s grace to seep into our being. Perhaps our limping guides us onto the path of vulnerability, openness to God and others, so blessings can flow abundantly.

We are hearing the story from Jacob’s perspective. I wish we also had Esau’s perspective of his wrestling match with God. Perhaps Esau wrestled projecting his pain onto God. Viewing God as a woman, for Esau struggled with his mom, nothing was ever good enough for her. She was always asking him to care for his brother. Esau wrestled with God to unload his pain, bitterness, and desire for revenge. By morning Esau was transformed and had his own limp. Scripture explains, **Genesis 33:4 “Esau ran to meet Jacob, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.”** God wrestled with both these brothers trying to clean up their messes, so God can bless them and all people.

Unfortunately, this pattern of family strife kept resurfacing leading to most of the dysfunction, battles, pain, hurt, and wars of the Old Testament. If you read the Old Testament carefully, you will notice that God is always wrestling with humanity to bring grace, healing, and blessing. Humanity blames God, scapegoats God, transfers and projects all of our messes unto God. Humanity even justifies war by claiming it is God’s will. God is pure, love and grace. God transforms, redeems, renews.

Linda Fabian Pepe writes, “As an acknowledgment of the new identity to come, God baptizes [Jacob] with a new name...No longer will Jacob be able to call himself “trickster,” “manipulator,” no longer will Jacob be able to identify himself in a way that is anything other than God-like! Can you

imagine doing that in your own life? If you were unable to identify yourself or talk about yourself in a way that was anything other than God-like? So many times, we hang on to the names and perceptions of who we are that are either given to us by our parents, or our peers, or even our actions—we get so caught up in our identity; in what we call ourselves, or the bad ways we act or think, or the things we have done ... that we miss the fact that God is giving us a new identity—a new name.” Peter explains, **1 Peter 2:9 NRSV “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.”** Accepting our new names, growing into our holy identities, is a tough journey, a wrestling match, and most likely by the time you are done, you will end up with a limp.

Jacob and Esau encourage us to keep limping through the sleepless, restless nights. Remember God’s promises to love you, always be with you, never give up on you and to restore your soul. Hold onto God’s promises, and you will be blessed. Never let God’s promises go for God will give you strength to limp onward into the Promised Land of abundant, joyful, loving life.

We have theories of why there is so much suffering in the world but no answers. Even the heroes of our faith suffer terribly. Moses never made it to the Promise Land. David’s family was full of hatred, lies, and murder. John the Baptist had his head chopped off and displayed on a platter. **Matthew 14:13-21 NLT “As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone. But the crowds heard where he was headed and followed on foot from many towns. Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. That evening the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “That isn’t necessary—you feed them.” “But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!” they answered. “Bring them here,” Jesus said. Then Jesus told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!”**

This is an inspiring account of God providing abundance from scarcity; but, what about all the times that God does not intervene? All the times the crowds went away hungry? All the people in the world right now that are starving?

We can trace Jacob and Esau’s mess back to mistakes in their family. What about people that are loving, caring, joyful that are stricken with horrible diseases? Jesus healed the crowds, but what about the people who were so sick they couldn’t come to Jesus? Jesus healed children across space, but what about all the children that suffer and die? What about accidents that kill? What about natural disasters? We have a loving God that has overcome death, so why must each of us travel through the horizon of death, to shed our suffering, shed our deteriorating shell for our soul to receive our glorious eternal body for our soul. Trying to answer these questions in the midst of tragedy often deepens the pain.

After two years of seminary, I learned all sorts of theories on these questions. My final year I served as a chaplain for the surgical intensive care unit of a level 1 trauma hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Most of the patients were young. Only about 50% survived. My first day, 7 patients died. I prayed with families as they cried beside their child. Several were youth, who were athletic, full of life, with marvelous futures, until a freak accident took their life. I accompanied spouses to the morgue, who earlier that day, kissed their spouse thinking they have a lifetime together. My heart still sinks, wrestling with God, limping, every time I hear a life flight helicopter. All of those theories trying to answer the questions of suffering, disease, and accidents became hollow to me. I was doing plenty of wrestling with God. Through it all my conviction that: God is with us; God loves us; God will resurrect us to glorious

eternal life; grows more resolute. Numerous people just before death have tried to explain to me the wonder of heaven, the compassion of Jesus, and how their family and friends in heaven were welcoming them. They spoke about glory, magnificent, grandeur, joy, and love. I have seen God provide peace and love in horrible situations.

The longer I live, the less I know. The more I discover about God, the more aware I am of how little I know about God. Sometimes a single person prays and God does amazing miracles. Sometimes thousands of people pray a good prayer, that surely is in accordance with God's will, and yet God does not intervene. Surely, they will be healed in heaven and have everlasting life, but why can't they be healed having a long life on earth. Yes, God will bring good out of every situation, but why doesn't God intervene to stop more difficult situations. Sometimes our loving service satisfies a multitude. Other times our loving service fizzles, the fish and loaves are not multiplied, and we are left hungry. Sometimes we are like the disciples overwhelmed by the need. Unable to provide what is needed.

I wrestle with God often. My life, mistakes and questions have given me a limp. God's grace inspires me to keep limping.

I reluctantly answered the call to serve as a pastor to help people experience the grace of God. I have no answers to the why of suffering. I continue to serve as a pastor to remind people that God is with them, God is love and joy, heaven is glorious and God will resurrect each of us to spectacular eternal life. I don't understand why things are such a mess on earth, but I do know that Jesus will wipe away every tear and restore our soul for surely, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

On this side of heaven, we wrestle with God. We limp. We seek to follow God's example in giving manna, Jesus feeding the multitude and the Lord's supper. With compassion, we take what God has given us, bless it, bless each other and share.

What might that look like at the bedside of a young person stricken with a terminal disease shuttering with pain. Being present, listening, silent. Acknowledging the pain and the blessings, the gift of life, love, joy, the promise of resurrection. Praying and hoping for a miracle of healing yet aware that to no fault of anyone the person might die, yet confident in God's promise of pain free eternal life. Wrestling with God. Sharing all of it.

The mystery of faith we take, bless and share, then are nourished, caught in a web of grace, pulled into love, connected with joy and drawn to eternal life with everyone. Through our limping, pain, struggles, disease, tragedy and death God is with us. God is love, Heaven is glorious. God will resurrect each of us to spectacular eternal life. Amen