

Genesis 32:22-32
A sermon by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang

It was an unseasonably warm afternoon in late October, 2016. The bright sun was overhead and the leaves burned with the colors of autumn. Davin and I took each other's hands as we committed to love and encourage one another, to respect and challenge one another, and to walk together in sickness and health, in abundance and need, until death parts us. On our wedding day, Davin and I forged a new identity: no longer were each of us *only* individuals with distinct priorities and values. We were creating a new existence together: a shared life with shared priorities and shared values. To symbolize this new identity, we each took a new name. On that bright autumn day in 2016, a new entity was called into being – the Thomsen Tang family.

Just 16 days after our wedding, Davin broke his leg playing soccer. You can imagine how the next 48 hours played out: overnights in the ER, surgery, so many pain meds, the first of many visits with a PT, and eventually, me escorting home a somewhat-immobile husband. This is not how I imagined our early marriage playing out. The impact of Davin's broken leg was deeply felt: emotionally by both of us, and physically by Davin. But it also had an impact on this brand new entity that we had created together – our relationship. Instead of an abundance of joyous laughter, silly bonding experiences, and the start of our adventures together, the earliest season of our life as the Thomsen Tang family was characterized by some laughter and definite bonding, certainly; but also by struggle and pain. The emergence of this new entity, this new relationship that was our marriage, was distinguished by a limp – an emotional limp in our relationship, and a physical limp for Davin.

Bearing this story in mind, we're now going to turn to God's Word. Our Scripture reading today is about Jacob, who is described in Genesis 25 as a twin who wrestled with his brother in his mother's womb. When the twins were born, he emerged grasping the heel of his older brother. The younger boy's name can be translated "grasper," "supplanter," or even simply, "heel." Jacob's birth narrative and his name were defining for his identity. He lived into his moniker as a grasper. Genesis depicts Jacob striving to secure the very best for himself, no matter the cost. In this way he reminds me of the character Thenadier, the conniving innkeeper in *Les Misérables* who is the foster father of the girl Cosette. Thenadier scams Cosette's mother Fantine out of her life savings, down to the last penny, claiming to pay for medical treatment for the child, when really he was just lining his pockets. Similarly in Genesis, Jacob tricks his own brother out of his inheritance as the oldest boy, tricks his father out of his blessing, and tricks his uncle out of some valuable sheep. Jacob ruthlessly pursues whatever profits him the most, regardless of its effect on others.

Genesis 32 finds Jacob homeward bound after 20 years on the run, with his wily past threatening to catch up with him. This passage unfolds the night before Jacob is set to meet his brother for the first time in 20 years, and he doesn't know what Esau's reaction will be toward him. At their last encounter two decades earlier, Esau had threatened to kill his twin because of Jacob's deception. So the odds seem slim for a joyful family reunion.

Now hear these words from Genesis 32:22-32

²²The same night (the night before Jacob had arranged to meet his brother Esau) 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 the man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So the man said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man^[a] said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[b] for you have striven with God and with humans,^[c] 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,^[d] saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

The word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Now, let's just call a spade a spade and say, what the heck?? This is one of those weird, off the wall OT stories that we kinda just shake our heads at. This scene could have just as easily been in the silly Mexican wrestling movie, Nacho Libre. Let's set aside crazy wrestling costumes, WWF, and Nacho Libre aside, and reflect for a moment on the actual sport of wrestling. My own experience as a wrestler has been limited to leg wrestling my sister Karissa, in which she always won. But for those who wrestled in high school or college, or wrestled against a parent or sibling in the living room, you know how fatiguing it can be. In a wrestling match, you engage every muscle, ready to pounce or defend in an instant. It's easy to imagine the mounting exhaustion of Jacob's all-night wrestle-fest with the man he later identifies as God. Beyond the physical aspect of Jacob's wrestling, this encounter with the stranger also seems to take Jacob on an emotional journey. We can imagine Jacob moving through a couple different emotional experiences as he grapples. So we're going to break this wrestling match down into three stages, like rounds of a boxing match. And as we consider Jacob's emotional experiences in each of the rounds, ask yourself: in which round of Jacob's encounter with God do you locate yourself? With which emotional stage of wrestling do you most identify with Jacob? Let's hit the mat.

Round 1: This story is sandwiched between Jacob's plans to meet Esau earlier chapter 32, and then the actual encounter with Esau in chapter 33. Because the wrestling match is the deli meat between the two slices of Esau bread, the construction of the text implies that the unknown opponent foreshadows Esau. It's clear that Jacob anticipates an adversarial meeting with his brother the next day. Does Jacob also perceive this stranger as an adversary? After all, the stranger arrives on the scene shrouded in the shadows of night. Nighttime, not only in Scripture, but in the stories we hear on the news, in fairy tales, folk lore and legends, is almost always associated with fear, danger and the unknown. The nighttime setting of this encounter provides clues as to the fear Jacob may have experienced when the mysterious man stepped out of the shadows and called for a throw down. Does Jacob's fear resonate with you? Maybe your interactions with God have seemed sudden, unwanted, or laced with anxiety. God sometimes visits us while we are in the dark night of the soul, when we are unprepared to engage with him. Sometimes, God's initiative in our lives can be scary.

Or maybe the idea of wrestling itself seems scary, difficult, or painful. After all, the act of wrestling is an embrace of conflict. For many of us, conflict avoidance is a preferred mode of operating. Does this avoidance apply to your relationship with God? When we avoid direct engagement with God, especially regarding difficult or painful things, we create a bifurcated relationship with Him. What I mean by that is that we give lip service to seeking and doing God's will, but really we are deciding for ourselves what's best, and convincing ourselves that it's God's will. This is one of the results of avoiding grappling with God. Are you afraid of what going *mano a mano* with God might lead to?

The bell rings. Round 1 is over. Jacob steps into the ring for Round 2. Overcoming the fear we assume he experienced, Jacob engages in the struggle against the stranger. Later in Scripture, the prophet Hosea interprets Jacob's wrestling as a metaphor for the nation of Israel's struggle against God. In this interpretation, when Jacob prevails over the man in v.25, it's not actually be a good thing. Why? We know from the OT prophets that stubborn, faithless Israel succeeds in shaking off her God-given vocation and identity, just as Jacob succeeds in overcoming his opponent. Hosea 12 interprets Jacob's wrestling match as a foreshadowing of the sinful skirmish in which the nation that will bear his name engages against God. Do you identify with this? Do you find yourself head to head with God in a battle of wills? Maybe, like Hosea's interpretation of Jacob, your own wrestling with God reflects a stubborn rebelliousness that pits you against Him and His will for you. Are you determined, like Jacob was, to prevail against God? What are the consequences when your own desires win out?

The bell rings again. Round 2 is over. Round 3 begins, and the stranger surprises Jacob with a sudden, forceful move, striking Jacob on the hip socket and putting his hip out of joint. Maybe you find yourself in a similar situation – seeking interaction with God, maybe even seeking to be obedient to God's call on your life, doing your best to serve Him, and yet you are wounded in the process. Maybe, like Jacob, your intimacy with God has created suffering. And yet for Jacob,

this injury seems to be a game-changer. There is a marked change in the man who, thus far in his life, has gone to every extreme to shirk responsibility. He has run from adversity, and has made weak, non-committal promises to God. But suddenly as the wrestling match comes to close, Jacob turns from fighting against God to clinging to Him. He won't let the man go. Was he clinging in dependence, due to his injury? Was he clinging because he recognized the stranger's divine identity, and typical of his conniving character, he wanted to milk a divine blessing out of him? Was he clinging because of the awesome realization that he had seen the Lord face to face? Maybe, like Jacob, you find yourself clinging to God, unwilling to loosen your grip on Him. Are you clinging in faithful dependence -- out of your own desperate need for God? Or are you clinging to God in pursuit of your own gain?

In which of these three rounds of wrestling do you find yourself today? Fear? Rebellion? Clinging? What do you see of yourself in Jacob? And what do you see of God?

Let's keep moving through the passage. In the next verses, 27-28, Jacob is given a new name, the name of Israel. This is not the first time God has declared a name-change for a biblical character. Think of Abram, which means exalted father, being dubbed anew as Abraham, meaning father of many. In changing the names of Abram and Sarai, God changes their identities to be the parents of the family through whom God would bless all the world.

The name change from Jacob to Israel has similar connotations. God is going to call something forth, just as he called forth something new from Abram and Sarai. God is bringing forth new life FOR Jacob, which we begin to see in the next chapter in the surprising outcome of his meeting with Esau. And God will also bring forth new life FROM Jacob. From this conniving grappler, God later establishes the nation of Israel, a people whose vocation was to cling in dependence to their God. But these new creations come at a cost in chapter 32. Jacob's embrace of a new identity required an all-night grappling with God that left him injured. His new identity is marked by the weakness and vulnerability of his hip.

In this I am reminded of the early days of our marriage, when our new identity as a married couple was marked by injury. I had said yes to walking hand in hand with Davin in sickness and health. But was I ready to embrace the patience required for Davin's healing process? Together, we had claimed a new identity as husband and wife, and had embraced the new name that defined us. But was I ready to be hindered by a limp as we embarked on life as the Thomsen Tangs? Of course I wasn't ready. And yet the Lord used that season of injury and struggle to begin to shape me individually, and to form us as a couple, into the type of family God intends us to be as the Thomsen Tangs.

When Jacob departs the scene with a new name and new identity, he limps into the rising sun as a cripple. On first glance, it would seem that Jacob's new identity was won by prevailing over God. Yet it strikes me that the new creation God calls forth out of Jacob the Grasper is actually rooted in the injury that rendered him vulnerable, clinging to God. Do you find yourself in that place, limping after a transformative, but nonetheless weakening encounter with God? Have you considered the ways that your injuries, your weakness, might actually be the bedrock of the transformation you've experienced? Are there ways God might need to strike your hip socket in order to bring about transformation in you? And are you willing for that to happen?

There is another whose new life is marked by wounds. There is another who grappled against mighty power, and prevailed. Think of the story in John in which the resurrected Jesus appears before Thomas. Even after conquering the curse of death and triumphing over the grave, a gash from the sword that pierced him was visible in the side of the Lord of the universe. The skin of his wrists was still ripped because of the nails that bound the incarnate God to the tree of salvation. Jesus' resurrection body -- his new creation body -- was and will forever be marked by the injuries of his submission to death. Think of the implications of this. If Jesus' resurrected body is marred by the piercings of crucifixion, this means that His wounds are not something to hide. Instead, they are tangible markers of God's new creation. Injuries, and the marks they leave, can be reminders of the process by which God brings about resurrection life. This is true and for me. We carry our wounds, both seen and unseen, to reflect the glory of God's healing redemption. Whatever limp you may have from your tangles with God needn't be a shameful thing that merely reminds you of your broken, sinful nature. Your limp, your injuries, like Jacob's and like Jesus', might also be redemptive.

The last thing I'd like us to consider is the concept of **blessing**. In the south we love the word "blessing." #blessed is everywhere (show pictures from FB or Instagram of #blessed). We usually associate blessing with "the good life," and the good life usually centers on me and what makes me happy. But consider what it has meant in Jacob's life to be blessed. God's blessing in v. 29 is not the first blessing Jacob received. Recall that Jacob duped his father into bestowing on him the blessing of a firstborn, the blessing that was reserved for his brother Esau. Here in chapter 32, just one fretful night away from encountering his rageful brother after all these years, we can almost imagine Jacob crying out: *has Isaac's blessing really brought good things for me?* The life of Jacob the heel-grasper has been defined by scheming, trickery, and fearful fleeing. And yet for some reason here he presses for another blessing from a different man, one he identifies as the living God. But Jacob's blessing from God comes at the cost of a crippling. Similarly, the blessing that has been earmarked for the nation that will bear Jacob's new name is ultimately not about them. Yes, the blessing on Israel includes promises of land and provision. But ultimately, God's blessing on Israel is not for their own sakes, but for the sake of all the nations – even their enemies. This is a very different kind of blessing than what we tend to see on Facebook and Instagram.

As a follower of Christ today, what does it mean for you to be blessed? When Levi and Keegan were baptized earlier this morning, we celebrated one aspect of God's blessing. God's blessing poured out on us means that we are beckoned into His family and claimed as sons and daughters. *I'm a child of God, yes I am!* we sang earlier. Now *that* is surely a #blessed kind of life, regardless of whether it brings prosperity or poverty! God's blessing poured out on us also means that we are enabled to say yes to Jesus, and to grow into the image of Christ. Again, what else would be more #blessed than the ability to grow in Christlikeness?! But what actually *IS* Christlikeness? Christ's life models an embrace of weakness and vulnerability over and against cultural or social power. Christ's life reflects humility rather than self-advancement. It is a rejection of selfishness, a rejection of ambition, a rejection of seeking one's own good. The blessing of Christ takes the form of a cross. And that cross leads to death.

Do you want to receive the Lord's blessing that *makes* you good, that forms you into Christlikeness, that forms your life into the shape of the cross? Or do you simply want to look good or *feel* good? Jacob's whole life was a pursuit of his own happiness and prosperity. How often do we try to wrestle with God for the same reason? How often do we grapple with God for the sake of our own good? But thanks be to God, He doesn't acquiesce to our selfishness. He does bless Jacob, but it's for God's own purposes rather than Jacob's desires.

All of this points us to two final questions. The first question is this: what do you see of yourself in Jacob? Jacob is a conflicted character. He's deceptive. He's stubborn. And yet, perhaps *because* he pushed through his fear and grappled with a mysterious stranger who turned out to be God, perhaps *because* of an injury inflicted on him by God, he chooses to cling to God. He is given a new identity by God. And he pursues the blessing of God even with its great costliness. What does this story about Jacob tell you about yourself? How do you see yourself in Jacob? What hope can you find in Jacob's story?

Finally, and most importantly, what does this passage reveal about God?

God makes the first move toward Jacob. He initiates contact. He also gives abundant blessings and clearly pursues the good of Jacob and his family, even if it's not the kind of good Jacob wanted. And yet, this God is wily, even dangerous. He cannot be put into a box. In this passage, He isn't God, my comforter and best friend who gives me what I want. Like the beavers in Narnia say to Lucy about Aslan, the Christ-figure of the books, "Of course Aslan isn't a tame lion! He isn't safe. But he's good."

How is this good, dangerous God inviting you to wrestle with Him today?