

No Letting Go (Gen 32:22-31)

A Sermon For Every Sunday

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Peace! Today I want to talk with you about the great art known as professional wrestling. My love for wrestling, sometimes known as wrasslin or sports entertainment, goes back to the days of Dusty Rhodes talking about “Hard Times” or Macho Man Randy Savage telling us to “Snap into a Slim Jim!” Wrestling often uses stories to build up interest in upcoming matches and I especially love the stories of an underdog.

One of my favorite examples of this was the buildup toward Wrestlemania 30. The diminutive, by wrestler standards, Daniel Bryan was in a triple threat match against two wrestling legends, Batista and Triple H. On paper, Daniel Bryan did not have a chance. Didn't belong in the same league with two wrestlers who were more successful, stronger, and bigger than him. But Daniel Bryan would not give up. Against all odds, Daniel Bryan beat them both and became champion.

Our scripture today features a wrestling match. And I am excited to talk with you today about the ways in which God teaches us to walk with a limp. I'm amazed at God's willingness to meet us in crisis. Jacob is on the run when we meet him. Ever the schemer, Jacob is preparing to meet his brother Esau and is

reasonably terrified. It has been years since he has seen his brother and the last time he saw him, Jacob pulled a fast one on his brother. A heist that would flip their familial roles and destinies. Jacob knows he did Esau wrong and is anticipating the worst! Last he heard, Esau wanted vengeance for the theft of his birthright. Jacob does what too many offenders try to do, he tries to set the terms of reparation. Jacob figures goats, sheep, cattle, donkeys, male and female servants will make up the difference. A mere slice of what he has gained through deceit, in Jacob's mind, should cancel the debt he owes to his brother. Jacob's repentance comes with an emergency exit. The scripture tells us that Jacob split his people and his property into two groups; a contingency plan so that if "Esau comes to one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape." Jacob is in a panic! He has prepared his reparation, he has prepared his escape, now just in case those fail, Jacob prays for deliverance. He reminds God of God's promise. A promise given to his father's father, a promise seemingly in jeopardy if his brother's bloodlust rules the day. Jacob prays for deliverance, then he rests. When Jacob goes to sleep, God does what God often does. God interrupts the crisis and positions God's self as bigger than the problem. I want us to park the bus for a moment and consider the way God answers Jacob's prayer. Jacob wants deliverance, Jacob humbles himself and declares "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant." Jacob is not talking about what he deserves because what he deserves is not beneficial. Jacob wants deliverance and is willing to

send his family, his servants, and his property into uncertain circumstances ahead of him as he spends the night by himself.

Jacob is alone. No family, no servants, no possessions. Just Jacob with the knowledge that the next day he is going to face the person whose birthright he took. Perhaps even without the divine encounter in this text, Jacob would not have been able to sleep but the text shows us that Jacob wrestles with a man until dawn. The wrestling match is quite a contest as the man strikes Jacob in the hip yet does not prevail. Now friends I don't know if your hip has ever hurt. Your hip is one of those body parts where you don't really think about what they do until they hurt with every movement. Jacob is in pain but he is not giving up. Jacob's tenacity leads the man to tell him "Let me go!" Jacob won't let go. Jacob won't let go until he is blessed. Now I want to share with you today that this sort of relentless relating to God is something worth emulating in our prayer lives.

When we have crisis we may tell people that we trust to pray for us. We may utter a few words, shed a few tears and then go back to contingency planning. We are not far removed from Jacob's plan. A little reparation, a lot of escape. Yet consider the thread of faithfulness. The trust one demonstrates in declaring, I will not let go until you bless me. I will not let go until you provide for me. I will not let go because I know I am holding on to the source!

The thread between Jacob not letting go until he was blessed and the woman with the issue of blood making her way through the crowd to touch Jesus. The thread between Jacob and the friends that knew this rabbi could heal their

friend so they lowered him through the roof just so he would be close to Jesus. The thread between the man on the roadside who would not follow social protocol and be quiet because he knew the answer to his prayers was in grasp. My prayer for us today is that we become a part of this thread. When the final notice arrives, when the diagnosis is heard, when we are convinced that our lives are falling apart. Just as our lives are falling apart that we would hold on to this thread! Jacob is not the originator of this thread. It is a thread that began with Jacob's ancestor, Abraham, who left all he knew, all his comfort and normalcy to follow God. Having no contingency plan but God.

How do we endeavor to wrestle with God? How does our prayer life reflect our willingness to say to God, "I won't let go until you bless me." Bless me to be a blessing. Bless me until the blessings spill from my storehouses into my neighbor's storehouses. Bless me so that the blessings transform this community and this world. Our world needs a people willing to get on their prayer mat and turn it into the wrestling mat. A people who limp yet say I could do this all day! Thanks be to God that our blessings don't hinge on our deserving. That just as our lives seem to come unglued, God says not so. Something you need to know about that Wrestlemania 30 story from earlier. Daniel Bryan winning the championship that night was not just the culmination of his hard work. Daniel had been working hard for years as an independent wrestler performing in front of small crowds, an international wrestler making his name on the Japanese scene, yet the powers that be in the WWE weren't interested in him being champion. He

was too small, didn't have the champion look that Batista or Triple H had. There were moments along the way where it looked like in spite of all the hard work, Daniel's Wrestlemania moment would never happen. Yet Daniel's performance won the crowd over in such a way that it inspired a movement. Using his catchphrase of "Yes!", audiences demonstrated their support for Daniel. His Wrestlemania moment was not a solo effort, it was a story of persistence on his part and on the part of his audience. I say this to say there are times in your life when you are ready to give up, no doubt about it. There are times when people look over you, look past you, underrate and dismiss you. But thanks be to God, we serve a God who takes little and makes much. We serve a God who takes a schemer and makes a son. A God who takes a man who was afraid of conflict and wrestles with him. A man who was trying to save some of his possessions and makes him the namesake of a nation. What is God waiting to do in your life, with your testimony, when you confess the reality of your problem is not realer than the solution? When you hold onto God and say I will not let go until you bless me! Friends, it is time to wrestle. Let us put down our contingency plans, put down our anxiety driven strategies. We must confess that our imaginations are limited. So limited that we even dare to limit God. We think the pile of bills is taller, the obstacles in life too great for us to rely on God. We need to dream bigger, hope deeper. Lean not into our own understanding. Lean on the One who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all that we may ask or think. It is not a strategy of escape, it is not a way around all troubles but a promise that we do

not navigate the difficulties of life by ourselves. We have to go through it in order to build our testimony.

After Jacob is blessed, he names that place Peniel or “the face of God” and said “I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.” Friends, what we go through in life is not just about us. Our experiences are the ingredients of our testimonies. Scripture tells us that we overcome through the power of our testimonies. Our testimonies live on. What we go through inspires faith in others like a candle used to ignite another candle. May we inspire others to trust God fully, to make things right where we have wronged, and to live our faith with the confidence of a child launching themselves into the air like their favorite professional wrestler knowing that they are loved. Hugging their parent with all their might, no letting go. Be blessed and be a blessing. Amen.