

October 16, 2016 Annual Meeting  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Genesis 32:22-31

### **Wrestling in the Dark**

The scene is mysterious: night, an interruption at the last leg of a long journey, at the shores of an ancient water way, the Jabbok, one man, alone in the dark at a river's edge. The man had been travelling with many other people and things, all of it connected to him in some way, but he's sent it and them ahead. He sent all that across the stream, all that he's accrued in the course of years: not just one wife, but two. And along with the two wives, two other women who are not mentioned here but who also are mothers of his children, of his at this point eleven children. We can imagine the baggage. We can imagine all the emotional baggage, and all the literal luggage, too: the belongings, the personal effects of all those people, and of his livelihood, too: herds. He was into animal husbandry, along with other husbandry. It was a herd of people and herds of animals. But he's sent them all on ahead. And he stands at the ford of the river, alone, in the dark. From out of nowhere, someone, something, some being takes him down, strains against him. All night he wrestles in the dark with something unseen. All night he hangs on, holding out for a blessing.

It's a riveting scene but a mere sliver of a larger story: the story of Jacob, third in the covenantal line of Genesis, Jacob the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Jacob has been away from the home of his fathers for years. This story at the river's edge takes place on the eve of Jacob's return, at the near shore of the last stream he has to cross to come back to a place, to come back to a place, and a person, from whom he has been estranged: his homeland, and his brother, his twin brother, the one with whom he shared a womb. The last time Jacob was home, the last time Jacob saw his twin brother, the last time they were together, Jacob had just tricked his father, stolen something from his brother, and then hightailed it out of town.

No surprise then, that Jacob stayed away—for decades. It was during those decades that Jacob found himself first with one wife, and then two, and children, more and more of them, children from other mothers, too, and an expanding business: herds of sheep and goats. Much of this involved trickery as well: the wives and the children and the herds of animals, much of this involved trickery: sometimes to Jacob's profit, sometimes at his expense. Always, in some way, at his expense. The tricks of the trade, the making of a living, the making of and being in a family, always in some way come with and cause expense. We can only imagine how well Jacob knows this. We can only imagine how it both saps his strength and gives even greater urgency to his nighttime request: bless me.

Jacob wrestles in the dark, until at last, at the prospect of dawn, the being with whom he wrestles must go. The being must not, cannot, be seen in the light. Seeing that would be too much for Jacob to bear. He cannot see it fully. He only sees it, dimly. That's all we can see of the mystery, this side of life. Here we see but dimly. Here we see the holy in darkness.

It's a mysterious scene, but just a sliver of Jacob's story, just a sliver, but something at which we pause, and ponder. We remember what came before in his story, we look ahead to what will come, what will come for Jacob, as the sun rises upon him.

Today is just a sliver in this congregation's story. This church is over one hundred and twelve years old, will be one hundred thirteen on the very last day of the year. In the course of all those years, every year, once a year as a congregation we pause, as if on the river's edge. We

do this with something called our Annual Meeting. I guarantee it will not last all night. I am hopeful it will be less strenuous. Like Jacob, we come to this day with all manner of baggage. Our more literal baggage has been sent out ahead: all those meeting materials, agendas, statements of income and expenses, a Book of Reports that rivals Genesis in length, all the luggage of the last year, and people, too, the personal effects of all of you here, all you have done, all because of your connection to this place. Today we ponder what's behind us, even as we peer ahead, looking for hints of the dawn. Today we recognize our sliver in the larger story, the story of God's covenant reaching back to Abraham, reaching forward through Jacob's children, reaching forward to us, we children of other mothers, reaching yet even farther to a new day, a day of such brightness yet to come. But today we wrestle. It is what we do, here on earth, we wrestle in the dark, holding on to this mysterious being, asking for its blessing.

We like, Jacob, will receive it, have received it. It's why he called that place, it's why we call this place, sacred. Jacob said he saw God face to face there, but it was still dark, Jacob didn't, Jacob couldn't, see fully that being, in the dark. Jacob left that place, and he crossed the river, and the sun rose, and then he met a person whose face he hadn't seen in years. It was his brother, coming towards him. And now Jacob could see his brother in a way he couldn't see him before. After his night of wrestling, after receiving that blessing, Jacob could see his brother in a new way: in the rising sun of reconciliation, Jacob could see his brother, and in him, something else. Jacob could see something in his brother, that in that mysterious way that we can see too, in other people, even now, even here, even today: "Seeing you," Jacob said, "is like seeing the face of God."