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GOVERNMENT STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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GENESIS 32:22-32

I am not sure where my love of the Old Testament stories originated. It had to have started when Dr. Heltzel sprinkled the waters of baptism on my head right here in this very place. It was then that this congregation promised to teach me the stories of the faith. Maybe the spark continued in the Sunday School classes with teachers like Mr. and Mrs. Norville who made the stories come alive. Or maybe in confirmation with Dr. Donaho where we had to memorize Biblical passages and learn the catechism and I somehow began to see the connection between these stories and my belief.

And I can't help but think my love of these stories was nurtured in the many, many Sunday afternoons I spent with my father in Page and Palette or Barnes and Noble, looking at books and listening to him tell me, "sometimes you just need a good mystery, a story that captures you and draws you in and helps you forget about the world for a bit." I am not sure I realized it then, but I certainly know it now. Some of these great old stories of our faith warrant curling up with your Bible and letting God's Word take you away.

It has been twenty years. Twenty years since Jacob left home. Well, actually twenty years since Jacob ran, scared half out of his wits, running to save his life from Esau's wrath and anger. Twenty years in which he worked for his conniving father-in-law, Laban. Twenty years where he added two wives and a whole host of children to his life on the run. He became prosperous building up flocks of sheep and amassing piles of money, more than enough to care for his large brood of kids. Twenty years since he had been home.

But, the time had come to stop running. Back in chapter 31, God comes to Jacob and says, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." (Genesis 31:3) So Jacob goes. And Jacob's only plea to God is this, "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him." (Genesis 32:11)

You bet Jacob was afraid. Sure it had been twenty years but plenty of people hold on to anger and resentment longer than that. For all Jacob knew Esau was still plotting his revenge, just waiting for the time to kill Jacob and his wives and all his children. Rage has a way of simmering and then boiling over. So, yes, you bet,

Jacob was afraid. But, God had told him to go back and Jacob listened and he went. He had been running for twenty years, running from the truth, running from reconciliation that would probably be painful, running from his demons, but the running had come to an end.

As Jacob and his family neared the old home place, Jacob wanted to appease Esau, to soften his hard heart, before they all arrived. Jacob may have changed some but he still was the dealmaker. He wanted to do anything he could to buy off Esau's anger. So Jacob sent ahead a peace offering of animals for his brother Esau. In fact, he sent present after present hoping that each one would soften Esau's heart.

Then he sent everyone else in the family along with all the other animals ahead of him across the river Jabok. His twenty years of wives, children, slaves, money, stuff all went ahead of Jacob leaving him all alone. You might remember the last time Jacob spent the night alone in the woods was when he was running away. It was the night he had that beautiful dream with the ladder reaching all the way up to heaven. A beautiful, sweet, feel good dream. Perhaps Jacob is hoping for another sweet dream to muster up his energy and build up his confidence to meet his brother.

But this night is not so sweet and happy and feel good. This night Jacob has the memories of his own sins before him; he has the memories of bad relationships in the front of his mind. He knows that the running is over one way or another. But if he could run some more he would.

Jacob knows what he did all those years ago – he has lived with the guilt for twenty years. Jacob is wrestling with his conscience. You know how that feels. You play the event over and over in your mind trying to remember exactly what happened and what you did, hoping, praying, wishing that you could go back and change it. You might even try to justify the action in your mind, but when your conscience gets a hold of you it's hard to justify sin. In the midst of this struggle with his past and with his conscience Jacob gets a heavenly visitor. This time it is not a ladder to heaven. This time it is one fierce wrestling match. It went on all night long. Scripture tells us that “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” (Genesis 32:24).

By this point in the story we have figured out the wrestling partner is God himself. All God had to do was put Jacob out of misery with one little flick of his finger. This surely wasn't a big challenge for God, but God must have known that Jacob needed to fight. He had to wrestle and struggle for his freedom. It couldn't be easy

for Jacob. Finally at daybreak God struck Jacob on his hip socket and told Jacob to let go. The fight was over. Only Jacob won't let go. Sounds like our old familiar Jacob. The one who would not let go of his brother's heel when they were born. He is good at holding on. He has had some practice. So, Jacob won't let the God go until...until God blesses him.

What is it with Jacob and his blessings? He stole the birthright and then he stole the blessing from his father. Now, he insists on having this blessing from the God. Jacob holds on for dear life: "I won't let go until you bless me."

"O.K." God says. The blessing goes like this: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:28). Sounds like a strange blessing but it was enough for Jacob.

As God disappears into the morning fog all Jacob can say is "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." And full of confidence, peace, and a very noticeable limp Jacob heads off across the river to meet his brother Esau.

The limp... that limp will stay with him the rest of his life. That limp will remind him, every time he steps a certain way, it will pull a little and his heart will remember, this night, this night of wrestling and blessing. He is forever changed. Life does not go back to how it was before he left. It can't. It goes forward, but with a noticeable limp. My hat goes off to Jacob because he does it. He limps into the next day ready to face the wrath that he so deserves from his brother.

We know all about these limps. I picked up a phrase from one of your former interim ministers, Jim Lowery. He has a way with words and one of his descriptions impacts the way I do ministry with grieving families. He wrote a prayer for a family after their loved one had died saying, "Heal these wounds, O God. But not too quickly, so that in time they heal from the inside out, to leave scars but no disease to cripple." (Prayers for the Lord's Day: Hope for the Exiles by James S Lowery, page 85)

Isn't that how grief is? Yes, we want healing, we want peace, we want to be better, but not so quickly, because we don't ever want to forget. It needs to hurt. It has to hurt. And there has to be a lasting impact, a scar, a limp. So that every time you turn a certain way, it pulls, it hurts but then you remember the blessing as well. And you limp into the future.

We all have our limps. Relationships that go through some strains, perhaps betrayal, whatever. You take your pick. Yes, it can heal, yes the relationship can survive, yes it can get better and trust can be restored, but... there will be a limp, a little scar, some element of the past remains, to remind you of the wrestle and the blessing, and you limp into the future and hang on for the blessing.

Even the church, this church, has some limps, some scars. I am by far not the most knowledgeable about the many facets of the history of GSPC. But I know a few things. I was born in the 1960's and the 60's were a difficult time for this church. Some people left, in the midst of strife, in the midst of racial problems, with a changing city as people left downtown to move to the suburbs, in the midst of whether to stay a downtown church or move as well, and GSPC struggled and stayed, but there were some hard times, some scars, some limps that continued to show through for many years.

I went through Sunday School in this church as a child with basically one other person my age. John Tamblyn and I were it, the only two in our grade. Every once in awhile I would complain to my parents about having no other kids my age, and the answer was pretty much always the same. "The 60's were hard times for the church and one of the lasting impacts was not many kids your age." You stick with it. You know there is a limp but you keep going and you hang on for the blessing.

There have been other wrestling matches late in the metaphorical nights. Many of you can name them, you remember them, you lived them, you were the ones hanging tight, saying "Come on God. We're not letting go until you bless this church."

And here Government Street Presbyterian Church still stands on the corner of Government and Jackson. You have quite a few scars, a limp here and there, some pains, some heart ache, some disagreement. But that's ok. The limp is necessary, to remind you, to never forget where you have been and to remember the blessing.

As much as I love the image of Jacob limping his way along to meet Esau, the image of when Esau and Jacob meets is enough to bring tears to my eyes. The story goes on in Genesis after our reading today. With Jacob limping along he looks up and sees Esau coming at him with 400 men. I am sure he expected the worst possible outcome. Jacob keeps limping forward though. Only he pauses enough to bow down over and over, showing Esau how he has changed and is contrite, trying to make peace. Only Esau can't stop running to notice the bowing

down. Esau is so excited to see his brother. He runs at full speed and embraces his long lost brother and kisses him and they weep.

If I was writing this I would have thrown in a few guns and ammo, a few punches and fist fights. Surely some kind of altercation needed to happen. But no. Even after everything Esau endured, after everything Jacob stole from him all he can do is run and embrace this prodigal brother.

And all Jacob can say in response is, “Truly to see your face my brother is to see the face of God.” Jacob has seen God face to face in a pleasant, happy dream of a ladder going up to heaven and in a fierce wrestling match. He knows what God looks like, and he knows looking at his brother who somehow, somehow has offered grace and forgiveness and freedom to a man who didn’t deserve it, that he is once again seeing God.

Just imagine that image of Jacob limping along at a snails pace, scared and alone but still limping forward and of Esau running with a smile on his face and his arms outstretched longing to hug his brother. Just imagine it.

And now Government Street Presbyterian Church, imagine your journey forward, embrace your limp. Live with the scars because you have striven with God and God has blessed you. Blessed you so that you can be a blessing. And thanks be to God for not letting go. Amen.