

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 3, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

Wrestling for a Blessing

Genesis 32:22-31 (July 1 & 2, 2017)

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Almighty God, thank you for these Ghost stories. Thank you for the ways you have visited us. Thank you for the mysterious ways we encounter you in this life. Now, receive these words I speak. May they be pleasing to you. Amen.

Several years ago, I read something about Martin Luther that I found both fascinating and deeply moving. Martin Luther was a Catholic priest in Germany in the late 1400's and early 1500's. He became the namesake of the Lutheran church movement after he worked to reform some things in the Roman Catholic Church.

Of course, there is much more to the story than this, but, the long and short of it is that, in the midst of attempting to reform some things within the Catholic Church, the pope at the time kicked Martin Luther *out* of Catholic Church... and, eventually, Luther started his own church.

In the midst of his excommunication from the Catholic Church, Martin Luther holed himself up at the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany.

As you might imagine, it was a time of deep emotional and spiritual turmoil for Martin Luther. He had committed his life to serving God through the Roman Catholic Church... yet, in his attempt to reform some things in the church he loved, the church leadership fired back, forcing him to permanently separate from them. It was, in effect, a grand divorce.

And those of you who have lived through divorce know all too well the emotional and spiritual turmoil that exists in the midst of divorce. What I read a few years ago that fascinated and moved me about Martin Luther was something from this particular period of his life.

After he had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, and while he was seeking sanctuary in the Wartburg Castle, Martin Luther was deeply troubled... and he was often heard wandering about the castle, loudly proclaiming, "I AM BAPTIZED!"

See, during that time, Luther felt plagued by demons who were seeking to steal from him any sense that he was a blessed and beloved child of God with a call on his life to bless the world. That is the claim of baptism: that we are, each of us, a blessed and beloved child of God with a call on our lives to bless the world.

In the midst of his deep emotional and spiritual struggle, Martin Luther felt evil forces were stealing his baptismal blessing... but he knew that theft was a lie. So, he needed to shout the real and holy truth to his inner and outer demons. "I AM BAPTIZED!" he shouted. "*I am a blessed and beloved child of God!*"

In his heart of hearts, Martin Luther *knew* this truth – he *knew* he was a blessed and beloved, baptized child of God. Yet, in his deep spiritual turmoil, he was struggling to trust that truth. And so, every time he yelled, "I AM BAPTIZED," he demanded, he pleaded, he *wrestled* that blessed truth back into his mind and heart.

Have you ever felt like you needed to do that?

Have you ever felt like you needed to demand, to plead, to *wrestle* with God for a blessing? If you have, you will perhaps find a special kind of kinship with the main human character in today's story from Genesis chapter 32.

Our current sermon series is entitled *Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visitations & Divine Encounters*. In line with this series, today's story from Genesis chapter 32 is, indeed, the tale of a holy visitation... a holy visitation *and* a divine encounter.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Mark kicked-off this *Ghost Stories* series with a focus on God's mysterious presence *in the beginning*. That week, we experienced how God's Holy Spirit moved over the waters of Creation,

animating life, breathing divine breath, and inspiring a whole lot of nothing to become a whole lot of *something*.

It was the Holy Ghost story that began it all.

Then, last week, we dove into a piece of Abraham and Sarah's story.

Abraham and Sarah, the couple to whom God had promised many descendants... also the couple who, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, lived with the painful reality of infertility. Until one day when some holy visitors came to their tents and told them Sarah would, indeed, bear and give birth to a son.

That son was named Isaac... and, between last week's story and this week's story much happened. Isaac grew up and married Rebekah, then Rebekah got pregnant with a set of twins. We learn in Genesis 25 – millennia before sonogram technology – Rebekah knew she was going to have twins because she could feel them wrestling in her womb.

Isaac and Rebekah named their twins Esau and Jacob, the younger of whom got *his* name because “Jacob” means “heel”...and Jacob literally grabbed at his brother Esau's heel in an effort to be born first.

Since he was *not* born first, but since he still wanted everything that came with *being* the firstborn, many years later Jacob tricked his brother Esau into giving him the birthright reserved for the first-born son.

Then, more years later, Jacob tricked their father, Isaac, into giving him the special, fatherly-blessing Isaac was reserving for Esau. At that point, Esau became so enraged at Jacob that Jacob had to flee for his life. He went to go live with Rebekah's brother, Laban, in another country.

Over the course of the next couple of decades, Jacob then built rather a large household, marrying a pair of sisters, and having 13 children with his two wives and their handmaids. During that time, Jacob *also* became extremely wealthy, building a large heard of healthy livestock.

However, as had become a pattern for Jacob, he and his family grew estranged from Laban, so they fled Laban's household... and headed back toward Jacob's family home.

Of course, as they all embarked on that journey, Jacob knew it was likely that he would encounter his brother Esau. And, even though decades had passed since Jacob escaped Esau's rage, Jacob was still extremely concerned about seeing his brother again. He knew how badly he had mistreated his brother... and the guilt had him paranoid.

So, in an effort to win his brother's affection, Jacob sent nearly all of his livestock and many of his servants to Esau as a kind of peace offering.

Then, Jacob, his wives, and his children all hung back a few days to make sure the gifts arrived at Esau's before they did. And *that* is where the story is when Jacob had the mysterious wrestling match we heard about in today's reading from Genesis chapter 32.

Again, Jacob was alone for the night, preparing to meet his brother, when a mysterious stranger wrestled with him all night. When neither of them had won the wrestling match by daybreak, the mysterious stranger struck Jacob on the hip and demanded that Jacob let him go.

"'You can't go until you bless me,' Jacob replied. Then the man asked, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. The man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have wrestled with God and with men, and you have won. That's why your name will be Israel.' Jacob said, 'Now tell me *your* name.' 'Don't you know who I am?' he asked. And he blessed Jacob."

The name "Israel" means "One who wrestles with God." So, in this particular Ghost Story – in the midst of the emotional and spiritual turmoil brought on by his family drama – Jacob wrestled with a mysterious stranger who turned out to be God himself. And, in the course of that holy wrestling match, Jacob demanded a blessing from God.

It's kind of like how Martin Luther shouted to his inner and outer demons, "I AM BAPTIZED!" In the midst of Luther's own emotional and spiritual turmoil – driven by a very different kind of family drama – he *needed* a blessing... and he was going to get one, even if he had to wrestle some demons to secure it.

Though we didn't read this part of the story, it's worth noting what happened to Jacob *after* his holy visitation-*slash*-wrestling-match.

After the holy visitation-*slash*-wrestling-match, Jacob did, in fact, reunite with his estranged brother. And it was really quite beautiful: Esau was *thrilled* to see Jacob and graciously welcomed him into his presence – Esau even admitted there was no need for the peace offering Jacob had sent ahead of his arrival. Jacob had wrestled God for a blessing... and the next day, Esau offered him a different kind of blessing. The blessing of forgiveness and love.

I don't know about you, but I've done a lot of metaphorical wrestling over the course of my life. I've wrestled over decisions I've made, decisions I'm *trying* to make... I've wrestled over words I've said or left unsaid, actions I've taken or failed to take. I've wrestled over happenings in this community, I've wrestled over happenings in our country and world...and I've wrestled over the direction God wants to take this church.

I know I'm not alone in that kind of holy wrestling. I also know I'm not alone in pleading for a blessing from God in the midst of it. Because, even when we know in our hearts that we are beloved children of God, blessed by God to bless the world – even when we know that – when we are lost in emotional and spiritual turmoil, it can be terribly difficult to *believe* it... and to live it.

When you are lost in turmoil, you may not walk around your apartment yelling to your inner and outer demons, "I AM BAPTIZED"... you might not even feel like you can be as bold as Jacob was when he *demand*ed a blessing from God.

But we all need the reminder that God visits us in the midst of turmoil... and that, in those holy visitations, God wrestles with us, eventually offering the blessing we so desperately need.

That's the good news of our story from Genesis 32. And, alongside this story from Genesis 32, I'm so thankful we now get to celebrate Holy Communion... because Communion is, itself, a Ghost Story. Communion is, itself, a holy visitation. Communion is, itself, a divine encounter.

See, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is mysteriously present to us in the bread and cup of Communion... and, when we experience the gift of Communion, we are invited to wrestle in prayer and to receive our own blessing through this holy meal. Let us pray: