

"Holding On"

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²²The same night [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 he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, 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, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32:22-31)

When Jacob went on the lam twenty years earlier, he had run out of town with nothing but the clothes on his back. Now, as his caravan reaches the banks of the Jabbok, he returns home as a very blessed and prosperous man. His bountiful caravan includes two wives, two handmaidens, and eleven sons. They carry with them the best portions of Laban's flocks and cattle.

Even so, as Jacob nears the banks of the River Jabbok, he is feeling anything but powerful. The stream before him will soon empty its waters into the River Jordan, which means that Jacob is getting very close to the Promised Land. His blood pressure is climbing rapidly with every step, because his brother Esau is just a few miles away now. Jacob has no way of knowing how the brother who once wanted him dead will react when he sees him again. With deep uncertainty, Jacob sends his family and all of their possession across the river. Once again, Jacob is all alone, sitting helpless in the dark, not knowing what will happen to him next.

What happens to him next has become one of the most important stories in Judaism. In fact, it has been argued that Jacob's wrestling match on the bank of the Jabbok forms a model for each and every life of faith, because it represents a moment of ultimate decision.¹ Up until this point, Jacob has met every challenge either with wits and cunning or by cutting and running. This challenge, however, is not like the others. This time, there was no time for cunning or cleverness. The hands of peril were upon him before he could react.

But more importantly, this time, Jacob does not know who -- or what -- his adversary is. Is Jacob wrestling a human being -- perhaps his greatest rival, the brother who has been hunting him for twenty years? Or is Jacob's opponent an angel, a being who straddles the worlds of the human and the divine? Could this unnamed wrestler be God himself? Others have suggested that the real adversary in this scene is Jacob himself, that he is really contending with his own internal demons and failures.

This ambiguity, it seems, is purposeful and intentional. In other words, scripture leaves us in the dark on this point to push us in a different direction. Perhaps the real issue here is not who, or what, is challenging Jacob, but rather **how Jacob responds to the challenge**. On this point, there is no ambiguity. This time, Jacob does not rely on cunning or deceit. This time, Jacob does not run,

¹ Amy Merrill Willis, "Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31" <http://www.workingpreacher.org>, Aug. 2, 2017.

even when the adversary is ready to end the fight. This time, Jacob responds to the challenge by holding on for dear life. "**I will not** let you go," Jacob says. "I am not going anywhere until I get what I really want and need. I will not let you go... until you bless me." Perhaps this story has come to mean so much to Judaism because it represents the moment when Jacob finally says to God, and to himself, "**I am staying right here, no matter what.**"

Stacy Keene, an aspiring writer from Pittsburgh, tells a heart-warming story about the birth of her first child.² Stacy's "first true love" was her grandfather, a man she describes as clever but modest, quiet but brave. When she became pregnant, he was the first person she wanted to tell. At the time, her "grandpapa," as she called him, had been in a protracted battle against cancer. He seemed to be losing the battle, but when she called to give him the good news, his spirits lifted. "You go put your feet up and have a glass of milk," he said, "and then call me tomorrow."

That first call began a beautiful tradition of nightly calls to her grandpapa during her pregnancy. Every night, when he would pick up the receiver, Stacy knew they had defied the odds for one more day. Every call was a gift, and every moment of the conversations were precious.

The night Stacy delivered her son, grandpapa was literally in the room right above her. He had been hospitalized with complications. His situation was becoming more and more precarious. The next morning, Stacy's mom came into the room with a suitcase full of clothes. "What are you doing?" Stacy asked her. "I don't go home until tomorrow."

"Just get dressed," her mom said. While Stacy put on a grey sweat suit, her mom dressed the baby in a little blue onesie and wrapped him tightly in a blanket. They snuck out by the nurses' station, as if the nurses wouldn't see them immediately, wouldn't recognize Stacy and her new baby, wouldn't recognize that they were not supposed to leave the floor. The nurses knew exactly who they were and exactly what they were doing. Stacy met their eyes with a look that begged "Please don't say anything." And they didn't.

When they entered the room, grandpapa's face broke into a wide smile. He beamed as he held his new grandson. He laughed out loud as they described their weak attempt at deceit and deception. When they crept back down and passed the nurses' station, they offered a mild but obligatory scolding, but gentle tears fell down their faces as they did so. They would never have stood in the way of this brave man who had said to himself, and to his God, "I am not going anywhere until I receive this final blessing."

Before he arrived at the Jabbok, Jacob's response to God had been purely conditional. Even after his amazing dream of the ladder to heaven, when God promised to bless and honor Jacob and his family until the end, all Jacob could bring himself to say to God is that he would stick with the Lord as long as it was good for him.³ "God," he said, "IF you will be with me, IF you will guard my steps, IF you will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, IF you can bring me safely to my father's house and not let Esau kill me, then you shall be my God."⁴ The contest at the Jabbok represents the most critical moment of Jacob's life because it is the moment when Jacob finally lets go of the "IF." In this moment, Jacob wasn't thinking about the blessings, about the stuff, or even about his family. He wasn't thinking about his own pain, because his leg has just been knocked out of its socket. In this moment, Jacob confronts his God and himself and says, "I am not letting go. I am holding on until my blessing is complete, no matter what."

And as soon as he does this, as soon as he lets go of the "IF," the light of dawn breaks upon a new Jacob. No longer the trickster. No longer the greedy deceiver. Jacob is a new man with a new

² Stacy Keene. "Holding On for Dear Life." www.themoth.org. August 2, 2017.

³ Amy Merrill Willis, "Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31" <http://www.workingpreacher.org>, Aug. 2, 2017.

⁴ Genesis 28:20-22

name and a new identity. From this time on, Jacob will be known as the one who stands and fights for his faith, for his future, and for his God.

All of us are wrestling with something. Some of us may be struggling to confront something in ourselves, saddened or frustrated that we cannot seem to overcome the challenge. We may be wrestling with people around us -- family members, friends or acquaintances who are hurting us, disrespecting us or just don't seem to understand us. We may even be wrestling with God, trying to understand why the Lord seems so far away, or why his help seems so slow in coming. In all of these struggles, the story of Jacob at the Jabbok reminds us that being in relationship with God requires us to hold on, even in painful times. It is a story about saying to God, "There are no ifs, ands or buts anymore. I am holding onto you, and I am not going to let go."

After Stacy's grandpapa died, her mother paid her a visit. "I think grandpapa would want you to know this now," she said. Stacy's mother went on to say that, just two days before Stacy had given him the good news of her pregnancy, her grandfather had decided to go through with a doctor-assisted suicide. He had already endured so much in his fight against cancer, and he had been told that he had only four weeks to live. He knew those weeks would not be pleasant, and he saw no reason to drag things out any further. The orders were already in. And then he got Stacy's call.

When Stacy's grandpapa hung up the receiver, he put his feet up, he had a glass of milk, and he decided to hold on. He knew he would be walking the last stretch of his life with a pronounced limp. It would be painful and hard. But he decided then and there that he would not let go until he had received one final blessing.

May God give us the strength to do the same. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.