

1 Sermon, April 14, 2013

Texts: Genesis 32:24-32

Title: The Bible in Song: "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown"

1. Jacob – bad choices
2. His choices led to the nighttime wrestling match
3. Charles Wesley – his own wrestlings
4. The blessing following the wrestling
5. The song flowing out of the wrestling

Intro: Sing song "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown"

1. Jacob – bad choices

How many of you have made some really, really bad choices, and ran away from them?

Don't answer.

Most of us have made some bad choices. Most of us have at least wanted to run away from them.

Today's reading from Genesis is about Jacob, who made some really bad choices.

First of all, he chose to trick his father into blessing him instead of his brother, Esau. His mother didn't help, even suggesting the way that he trick his blind father into mistaking him for his hairier brother.

Brother Esau was furious.

Rather than trying to work it out with Esau, Jacob became afraid and ran away, to a far country, where some of his relation lived.

There he fell in love with Rachel, Laban, his kinsman, offered him Rachel in marriage if he were to serve him seven years. But Laban gave him the older sister, Leah, instead. So Jacob was tricked into working for Laban 14 years in order to marry Rachel.

Laban was sneaky, so Jacob became sneaky, too, and bred the sheep in a way that would mean Jacob got more of the lambs, and Laban fewer.

Fearing that Laban would take these promised sheep away, Jacob ran away again, taking his wives and servants and livestock with him.

Laban chased after him, and they had some words together.

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Finally, Jacob tried to go back to his brother Esau's country, still afraid of Esau. Jacob sent gifts ahead, in order to soften Esau's anger. It worked. Esau forgave Jacob.

But before Esau forgave Jacob, Jacob spent an awful, anxious night out in the wilderness, all by himself, with a rock for a pillow. Jacob was playing a dangerous game, having separated himself from his wives, so that his wives might be safer from Esau's anger.

2. His choices led to the nighttime wrestling match

There in the wilderness in a place he would call Peniel, something happened.

All Jacob's selfishness and risk-taking came to a head. His abandonment of his own mother and brother, his unethical behavior in tricking first his father and then his father-in-law, his running away and abandoning temporarily even his own wives — all this came to a head in Jacob's mind.

It was a night of identity crisis, a night of relationship crisis. In the midst of it, a being came and wrestled with Jacob. It was a fierce wrestling, a violent wrestling that left Jacob with a limp.

Jacob demanded the name of his adversary, but his adversary went away at dawn without telling his name.

It's unclear who his adversary was: an angel perhaps, or his own conscience, or even Esau himself as some scholars suggest.

Jacob, with great effort wrestled him to a draw.

One thing is clear, however: it was a major turning point for Jacob; he marked the place with a pile of stones, and called the place Peniel, "I have met God."

When he met Esau later, Jacob made peace with his brother, and said he would come later to join his brother. But instead Jacob settled in a neighboring territory.

3. Charles Wesley – his own wrestlings

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This story deeply affected one of our spiritual ancestors, by the name of Charles Wesley. Younger brother to the more famous John Wesley, Charles lived in John's shadow, although he was more capable than John in many ways.

Charles had doubts about his own salvation. Was he truly forgiven by God's love? Was there grace enough for him?

Before his heart-warming conversion experience, Charles was in almost daily contact with a Moravian preacher name Peter Bohler. Bohler asked Charles: "Do you hope to be saved?"

Charles replied: "I do!"

Bohler asked, "For what reason do you hope it?"

Charles replied: "Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God."

Peter Bohler just shook his head, knowing that it was God's grace that was needed, and not Charles' goodness.

Charles was lonely, uncertain of his own identity in Christ, without a firm place to stand.

4. The blessing following the wrestling

Charles wrestled with his faith. Then one day, May 21, 1738, Charles felt the Spirit of God striving with his spirit:

till by degrees He chased away the darkness of my unbelief. I
found myself convinced. . . I now found myself at peace with God,
and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.'

The wrestling led to a peace that empowered Charles Wesley

5. The song flowing out of the wrestling

Eventually, Charles wrote the hymn I sang to you earlier. It was Charles' attempt to put his conversion into words, using the story of Jacob. Jacob put up a pile of rocks in celebration. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn.

The hymn originally had 14 verses – you can find all fourteen on the page following #386 in the hymnal.

Listen to some of the verses that didn't make the final cut:

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Wilt Thou not yet to me reveal Thy new, unutterable Name?
Tell me, I still beseech Thee, tell; To know it now resolved I am;
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go, Till I Thy Name, Thy nature know.

What though my shrinking flesh complain, And murmur to contend so long?
I rise superior to my pain, When I am weak, then I am strong
And when my all of strength shall fail, I shall with the God-man prevail.

Contented now upon my thigh I halt, till life's short journey end;
All helplessness, all weakness I On Thee alone for strength depend;
Nor have I power from Thee to move: Thy nature, and Thy name is Love.

My prayer hath power with God; the grace Unspeakable I now receive;
Through faith I see Thee face to face, I see Thee face to face, and live!
In vain I have not wept and strove; Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.

I know Thee, Saviour, who Thou art. Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;
Nor wilt Thou with the night depart. But stay and love me to the end,
Thy mercies never shall remove; Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.

The hymn is generally considered to be Charles Wesley's greatest work. Isaac Watts, a man older than Charles, and perhaps the most famous author of hymns of all time, remarked that Wesley's poem was "worth all the verses that he himself had written."

The good news in all of us, I think, is that there is a song in our struggle.
When we wrestle with ourselves, our temptation, our purpose, how to pursue relationships — when we wrestle with these things, it may be leading us to a song of joy.

There's a song in our struggle. I like that.
I like that better than a pile of rocks.

God's blessing turns something painful into something beautiful.
In fact, God's always doing that.

Thanks be to God.