

I

A few minutes before midnight, my wife Amy, who was 34 weeks pregnant with our twin boys, woke me up and said, “Ryan, I think my water just broke.” We drove to the hospital, and at 2:50 a.m., Nathan was born, and his twin brother Daniel followed one minute later.

The doctors performed some initial tests on the boys, and then held them up so we could get a quick family photo. The boys were nearly three weeks premature, so the doctors quickly whisked them out of the delivery room to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. I stood up to follow them, and just as I exited the delivery room, a nurse turned around and said, “I’m sorry, we have to get your sons settled in and run some more tests, so you can’t come into the NICU just yet.” So I turned around to go back to Amy in the delivery room, and another nurse said, “I’m sorry, you can’t come in here just now, but you can go across the hall to the recovery room and we’ll bring her in shortly.”

Just after 3 a.m. I took a seat in the recovery room. A few minutes later, Amy’s doctor came in and advised me that Amy had lost a considerable amount of blood, but they were working to get the bleeding stopped as quickly as possible. Then she turned and went back across the hall to the delivery room, and I was alone once again.

I took out my phone and looked at the photo we had snapped. I started to text some family and friends and tell

them that the boys had been delivered, but all of our family was at least 1,500 miles away in another time zone, and I decided that I ought to let them sleep. 3:00 turned into 3:15. 3:15 turned into 3:30. And still I sat there in that recovery room, alone.

I am an educated man. Compared to most of the people in the world, I am exceptionally wealthy, and I bear considerable privilege. And yet in those wee hours of the morning of May 12, 2011, with my wife in one hospital room and my newborn sons in another, none of that would have any bearing whatsoever on the situation at hand. I was completely powerless, and utterly alone.

II

Perhaps you, too, have come to such a place in your life. Something more than simply “the dark night of the soul.” Perhaps you, too, have come to a crossroads where your whatever wealth and power and privilege you may bear, whatever titles or degrees you may hold won’t make a lick of difference. Perhaps, you, too, have come to a place where you find yourself in the darkness, completely and utterly alone.

III

Our story this morning is about just such a man – a man who has been stripped bare of his wealth, his power, his privilege. A man who has become separated from his wives and children and now finds himself completely and utterly alone in the dead of the night.

Now, in full disclosure, I should tell you that this story is about one of my least favorite characters in the Hebrew Scriptures – a man by the name of Jacob. Jacob, in Hebrew, literally means “heel,” and Jacob’s moniker is well-earned. Last week, we read the story of Abraham and Sarah, whom God promised would be the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation. Jacob is the son of Isaac, whose birth story we read last week. Jacob was a twin, and when he and his brother Esau were in utero, they wrestled and jostled so much in their mother Rebekah’s womb that she must have felt like she was about to give birth to an octopus. In fact, when Jacob emerged from their mother’s Rebekah’s womb clutching the heel of big brother Esau.

Years later, when their father Isaac was advanced in years, blind, and about to die, Jacob tricked his father into bestowing the family inheritance on him that should have rightfully belonged to his elder brother Esau. When Esau discovered what Jacob had done, he became so enraged that he vowed to kill Jacob, but Jacob skipped town under the cover of darkness before Esau could catch him.

During the intervening years, Jacob has grown wealthy, shrewd dealings in his father-in-law’s livestock business. But now God has come to Jacob and told him to return to the land of promise, to the land of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. It’s time to go home.

And so Jacob sets out, with his herds and flocks stretching before him for miles. And then comes an ominous word. Messengers come to Jacob and report, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”

And so Jacob begins to pray, and that leads us into our text for this morning, so I invite you to listen for a Word from God from the Book of Genesis, chapter 32, verses 9-13 and 22-30:

9 And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. 12 Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'" 13 So he spent that night there.

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him

until daybreak. 25 When 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Jacob's prayer, there at the edge of the Jabbok, in the dead of the night, with Esau and his 400 men lurking somewhere out there in the darkness, is a fascinating one. Is it the prayer of a contrite man who has finally come face to face with his own sin and brokenness? Or is it another attempt by this trickster, a man whose name literally means "Heel," this man who has manipulated and cheated his way through life thus far, to manipulate the God of the universe into saving his hide?

In either case, Jacob waits there all alone in the dark, laid bare before the heavens. Perhaps he expected Esau's 400 men to come at the break of dawn and finish him off. Perhaps he expected that the heavens would open and chariots full of angels would surround

him. But he never expected what happened next.

Out of the darkness, without warning, Someone grabbed him. And Jacob responded instinctively, grabbing the Someone back.

When Jacob prayed that night, I suspect that Jacob was looking to cut some kind of deal with God. After all, that's what he'd been doing his whole life. He was a businessman. He was used to negotiating, used to working all the angles.

IV

So much of this life of ours is like that. So much of this life of ours is built on a transactional model. For example, if you pay your tuition and go to class and do the work, you will get a degree, which will lead to a job. And if you show up and do the work that's asked of you, that job will offer you a paycheck. And that paycheck will allow you to accumulate wealth and power and influence, which will then allow you to enter into transactional relationships with others.

But sometimes, we come to the ford of the Jabbok in the dead of the night. Sometimes, life happens, and we are stripped bare of all of our resources.

And when that happens, when we come to those places in our lives, how often are we attempted to take that transactional approach with God! How often do we pray, "OK, God, I'm in a fix here, but don't forget who I am. OK, God, I'm in a fix here, but don't forget

who my people are. God, if you will protect and bless me and get me out of this mess, then I will do thus and so.”

But here’s the part about this story that intrigues me. God doesn’t just sit off somewhere high in the heavens, like a bank president in a glass office, waiting for us to bring our best and final offer. God doesn’t sit up there watching us from afar, like some sort of aloof divine lifeguard sitting on a tower, there to blow the whistle and shout at us if we break the pool rules or to rescue us if we get in over our heads.

The thing that we learn about this God that is revealed to us in Scripture is that God is willing to *wrestle* with us. This God that is revealed to us in Scripture is willing to *get messy with us*. It’s a little early yet perhaps to be thinking about Christmas, but that’s what Christmas is about – a God who takes on human form, a God who willingly limits God’s own self, a God who enters into our brokenness, our despair, our messiness, a God who keeps showing up in unexpected places – in a manger in a backwater place called Bethlehem – in an upper room when the doors and windows had already been locked up tight – and in the dead of the night at the ford of the Jabbok. A God who enters into our world and *grabs hold of us*. And sometimes, all we can do is hang on for dear life.

I’m going to let you in on a little secret, my sister. I know you come to a church like this, and everyone looks so good in their Sunday best, and everyone

looks like they have it altogether, but I promise you, you’re not the only one who has been up all night wrestling with God, who comes limping in here this morning.

My brother, I know that when you look around you this morning, these look like people who can make things happen, people who are leaders in this community, and they are. But I bet you if you were to bump one or two of them on the hip socket, you’d see them wince, because a few of them have been wrestling with God and just trying to hang on, just like you.

Sometimes we clergy are referred to as “professional Christians.” We have advanced degrees in divinity and ministry and have studied the bible and theology with some of the brightest minds in the world. I won’t speak for them, but I will testify to you that my faith has grown the most not in the classroom, nor even from the “mountaintop experiences” of life, but when I have come to the ford of the Jabbok in the dead of the night, when I have come to those points in life where I have been laid bare, when I have been grabbed hold of by the divine Someone. Sometimes, the greatest act of faith we can muster is just to hang on and refuse to let go.

V

And that’s why I’m so grateful for this thing called the church, this group of disheveled, limping, bewildered people who wrestle with God, who struggle mightily to live into Christ’s

vision for full humanity. I'm so grateful for this thing called the church, where we can confess to God and to one another that despite all of our wheeling and dealing, despite all of our big talk, we are broken and in need of a redeemer. I'm so grateful for this thing called the church, where we can admit that sometimes, the life of faith isn't as peaceful and serene as we'd like it to be. Sometimes, we wrestle and struggle with God and one another, and we end up with limps to prove it.

I'm so grateful for this thing called the church, where we, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we who have been adopted into this family of faith through the life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus of Nazareth, we, who scheme and wrestle and struggle, can trust that for now, we see God dimly, as in a mirror, but one day, we shall see God face to face. For now, we know this mysterious God who grabs hold of us only in part, but one day, we shall know God fully, even as we have been fully known.¹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ 1 Cor. 13:12