

"Rasslin"

Genesis 32:3-12, 22-32

George Wagner wasted a lot of my time in the late 1950's. I never met him personally. But he came into our house on a regular basis in black and white through this new medium called television. It was a very manly thing for me. My Daddy and his cousin Ernest, who lived with us at the time, did a really great thing for me, inviting me into the living room with them a couple of times a week to watch "Rasslin' " from Capitol Arena in Washington, DC. And the main focus of this testosterone flow was anger at George Wagner. George was a nasty arrogant professional wrestler and sometimes Daddy's cousin Ernest would get so upset that Daddy would have to remind Ernest about his heart problems and encourage him not to get so worked up. And all this because of George Wagner but maybe you might know George Wagner better by his professional wrestling name - "Gorgeous George." "Gorgeous George" Wagner was the highest paid athlete of his day and one of the most famous people in the world. He was born George Wagner in Seward, Nebraska and began his wrestling career as a teen. He competed for ten years as himself, George Wagner, with very little success. Physically unimposing at 5' 9" and 215 pounds, he was a plain and less than average wrestler. Contemplating giving up wrestling as a failure, he came up with a gimmick that changed him and even professional wrestling forever. Here's what he came up with - grow his hair long so it could be curled and pinned back with gold-plated bobby pins; dye his hair platinum blond; wear elegant robes and called himself "the human orchid;" be escorted into the ring by a male ring valet who would spray the corners of the wrestling ring with disinfectant and perfume; have entrance music into the arena, always "Pomp and Circumstance." And all this he did with a flair. His ring entrance would sometimes take as long as the wrestling match itself. His pageantry and theatrics would work angry wrestling fans into a frenzy. And this newly named "Gorgeous George" was the consummate villain. He would cheat and infuriate fans to the point of rioting. But fans would flock in droves to see Gorgeous George wrestle and tune-in in record numbers to watch him on this new medium called television. We would adjust our television antenna by hand on top of the house to draw in WTTG-TV in Washington, DC to watch the excitement right there in our living room in rural Orange County, Virginia.

Thanks goes to Vince McMahon, Sr. and Gorgeous George for all this enjoyment and anger and hustling. Supreme hustlers, manipulators and tricksters, they were. I mean, cousin Ernest thought this wrestling was all real. You had better not tell him it was all choreographed or fake! Hey, me neither! I came to hate that villain Gorgeous George as much as Ernest did but still couldn't stop watching him. There was another hustler, a manipulator, a trickster. And he got into "rasslin' " too. His name was Jacob. His grandparents were Abraham and Sarah and his parents were Isaac and Rebekah. His brother was an older twin brother named Esau. In that ancient Hebrew society, older sons were especially honored with unbelievable honor. A preview of what this younger brother and future hustler would be like was when the twins came out of the womb: Esau came out first but there hanging on tight to Esau's heel was the younger one, the trickster, the hustler, Jacob. And that was just the beginning. Pretty soon, Jacob stole the special honored blessing of his father that was due to his older brother, Esau. These are the blessed

words that were supposed to be for Esau but the hustler, Jacob stole them for himself: "May God give you the dew of Heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and of the plenty of grain and wine. Let nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bear down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you."

Later, Jacob, all blessed up now, was sent off to find a wife. Along the way, Jacob had a strange dream about a ladder set up to Heaven from the earth. There he saw angels going up and down the ladder, from Heaven to earth. He was so inspired by the experience that he named the place "Bethel," which means house of God. He was so overcome with promised blessings in this dream that he said he would give to the Lord one-tenth of anything that he would ever own. With this great dream behind him, Jacob went off to find his bride to be, Rachel. But here our young trickster and hustler got out-hustled himself by Rachel's father, Laban. Laban tricked Jacob into waiting fourteen years to marry Rachel, the love of his life. But beware to father-in-law Laban - you just cannot out-hustle a hustler. Jacob never forgot how he got tricked by his father-in-law, Laban. He prospered at his father-in-law's expense. Through a science of animal breeding that he had learned along the way, he was able to grow exceedingly rich. This did not make his father-in-law's sons very happy. They said, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father" (Genesis 31:1, NRSV). And then Jacob saw that Laban was no longer regarding him favorably, because Jacob had out-hustled his father-in-law. So, Jacob decided to head back to Canaan, back to Daddy and back to Mama. He took his large family and his pack of animals and literally "got out of town at midnight." When Laban got wind of what had happened, he was angry and went after Jacob and caught up with him at a place named Gilead. Here's what Laban said to Jacob: "What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me . . . And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and daughters farewell?" (Genesis 31:26 - 28).

Well, after a lot of give and take they finally made up, but before Jacob could leave, he received these threatening words from Laban: "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me" (Genesis 31:49, 50). And now, as we come to our morning Scripture in Genesis chapter 32, Jacob, the one who tricked Esau many years ago, is about to meet his brother Esau. The chickens might be about ready to come home to roost for Jacob the hustler. He knows that he has really prospered by tricking his father-in-law and sons, but how can he get by Esau. Hebrew society carried long grudges. Jacob hustled Esau many years ago but he knows Esau won't forget. So what do you do when you are a hustler and you are afraid? Well, you pray. And you pray desperately. This was Jacob's desperate prayer: "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" (Genesis 32:11). And he brought a bunch of presents to appease Esau: hundreds of sheep, goats, camels, cows, and donkeys. He probably would have thrown in a Lexus and a Flat Screen Home Theater too, if they had been invented! And then he lay down for a good night's rest. But his longed-for rest turned into a "rasslin' match." And it wasn't his brother, Esau, that jumped on him, either. By the way, Judy can tell you about that jumping-on stuff by a brother. The very first time my future wife came to Virginia to visit my family, she had a very surprising experience. After pulling into my brother William's driveway

and hopping out of the car, William came tearing off the porch, tackled me to the ground, and started beating on me. I had forgotten to warn Judy about the way we brothers greeted one another when we hadn't seen each other for a while. It's too bad we didn't have YouTube back then. I don't know which video would have been more enjoyable viewing: my getting beat down by brother William or Judy's utter look of surprise and shock! Anyway, Jacob's brother Esau didn't jump Jacob. Some extraordinary unknown person did. And he and Jacob wrestled all night.

Here's the deal for us today. It was dark. Jacob was alone. Jacob was a mess. He was afraid. And he was no spiritual superhero. Jacob did nothing to earn this mountaintop experience with God. We learn that it was a mountaintop experience with God when we read in verse 28 that Jacob had "striven with God." The great artists of the world have always pictured Jacob wrestling with an angel, a messenger of God, from Rembrandt to Gauguin to contemporary artists.

Although we must hasten to add that there is a perfectly good Hebrew word for angel but it is never mentioned in the text. As we look at the "good book," this story is one of the great stories of the Bible. The great wrestling match. But we tend to think of spiritual people, people touched by God in a lot more holy terms, maybe Mother Teresa-like terms, very very different from who we are. But we humans are a lot more earthy. We are not that holy unless we pretend to be who we are not. No, the spiritual pie-in-the-sky stuff is a long way from who we really are. Well, Jacob we can relate to. Jacob, whose very name means "deceiver" or "trickster" or "hustler" was no Mother Teresa! There is nothing in his story that would even make you think that he is a good man. You wouldn't think that he's the kind of guy God would want to hang out with. I mean, he's as manipulative and fake as Gorgeous George! But here is his story, right here in the Bible. Jacob is alone, confused, afraid, desperate, on a dark mountain. Just like the kind of stuff that we go through. And it's a wrestling match with God. And when it's all over, Jacob limps away with a sciatic nerve limp, but he's blessed by God. Real spiritual life isn't always pretty. Sometimes it makes you want to stand up and yell in anger. It's not always pleasant. Intimacy with God isn't necessarily a reward for doing everything right. God's grace can surprise you at any time and place.

This rasslin' match of Jacob shows us that God can always sneak up on us at any stage of life, even when we're living life as a "liar, deceiver, trickster, hustler," even when we're living life as if God doesn't matter. And sometimes a connection with God may look and feel like a wrestling match, a struggle in the dark. And we might end up with a limp. And maybe that's okay. Maybe as we go limping through life, we can limp through this old world a little bit more vulnerable. Then, maybe our prideful holier-than-thou attitudes will take a back seat and we can receive a helping hand, receive a spiritual gift that someone else can give us. And then maybe in our limping, we will stumble a little closer to the ground with every step, making us more humble, walking more slowly, not running, but looking and listening for others who need to experience God's love through Christ. Maybe, just maybe, we need to be people of the limp. Not judges. Not perfectionists. A little messed up. Limping along because we have "rassled with God." Think about it. And who knows, our name might be changed from Jacob the hustler to Israel, the one who strives with God. Taking God seriously enough to strive with him, through all the ups and downs of life.

AMEN.