



What Defines Us

TEXT
Genesis 32:22–31

July 19, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Melanie Hardison

Prayer for Illumination: “O God, your Word is a lamp unto our feet and light unto our path. Illuminate our hearts in this time and draw us closer to you. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”

Our scripture reading is Genesis 32:22–31, the story of Jacob’s long night of wrestling. It takes place while Jacob is in the middle of a long journey, relocating his family and all of his worldly possessions back to the homeland of his father. As they travel, Jacob is also preparing to meet his twin brother Esau, with whom he has been in conflict his whole life. Jacob has sent lavish gifts ahead of the family caravan so that Esau will know Jacob comes in peace.

Listen now for the word of God:

²²Jacob got up in the night and took his two wives, Leah and Rachel, his entire household, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok River. ²³He sent them across the water with everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone on the riverbank, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, the man struck him on the hip, and Jacob’s hip was

put out of joint. ²⁶Then the man said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go — unless you bless me.” ²⁷So the man said to him, “What is your name?” “Jacob.” ²⁸The 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, “Please tell me your name.” The man said, “Why do you ask my name?” And there, the man blessed Jacob. 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 Jacob as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Recently I had the opportunity to do something I never dreamed I would do: I flew an airplane. That’s right. Pastor Melanie, who has never had even one official hour of flight instruction, successfully guided an airplane through the sky. And nobody died.

Flying was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I got to fly because my friend Anthony, who’s a pilot and a flight instructor, invited me to go up in his plane. It became a lesson of sorts, because airplanes are kind of like those special cars

in Driver’s Education, where you sit next to the instructor, and there are two steering wheels and two sets of brakes, and the instructor can take control at any time. So Anthony let me fly the plane. He taught me what to do every step of the way. I was nervous, but I was up for the challenge. I got to help with taking off, getting us up to our cruising altitude, and then I simply got to fly.

I was totally flying that airplane. And everything was smooth sailing ... until it wasn’t. All of a sudden as we were cruising along, I started to feel some resistance in the controls. I didn’t know what it was, I didn’t know what to do, and I panicked. The nose of the plane started to dip down ... I had trouble steering ... I couldn’t stay focused. The panic took over, and my brain flew right out the window.

I couldn’t tell if I was wrestling a gust of wind, or if Anthony had taken over, and I was wrestling against his control of the plane, or if the stress and adrenaline were wearing on me, and I was wrestling myself by giving in to doubt and fear.

I talked it out, took some deep breaths, and remembered to trust: to trust myself, to trust Anthony and the plane, and to trust God.

Anthony taught me in that moment to look out to the horizon, pick a point to focus on, and steer the plane there, using the big picture. And sure enough, looking up to the horizon got me out of the fear and back to the place where I could see the big picture again. And that's when I relaxed, and that's when I truly started to fly, and even could enjoy the landscape before us — the farms, the rivers, the trees, the sky. Once I faced my fear, tuned in to my strength and trust, and kept the big picture in sight, I learned I could fly.

It was the moments of panic — when I didn't know what I was up against, but I knew I was wrestling something — those moments I felt like Jacob must have felt, wrestling a mysterious being in the night on the bank of the Jabbok River.

You may remember Jacob as the guy who connives his twin brother Esau out of his birthright, and then tricks their father Isaac into giving Jacob the family blessing. Jacob seems to have had trouble accepting his place as the second-born son. He's not always honest, and he steps on others, including his own family members, to get ahead in life.

In today's reading, Jacob is in the middle of a long journey, relocating back home. He's traveling with this huge caravan of people, possessions and livestock. They come to the Jabbok River, and Jacob sends everyone across the water. For some reason, he stays behind, alone for the night at the river. We're not sure who or what he wrestles. The story is unclear. It's translated that he

wrestles a man, but historically some have interpreted it as an angel. Others say that Jacob wrestles his own inner demons all night long.

Whoever or whatever he wrestled, at the end of the long, hard night, Jacob concludes that he has wrestled with none other than God.

Jacob comes away from this encounter a changed man. He has met God vulnerable and alone, with no trickery, just pure, face-to-face struggle. He rises to the challenge and finds himself transformed. The encounter is so powerful that Jacob comes away limping.

He receives a new name and a blessing, *and* he renames that place Peniel, which means “the face of God.” Jacob says, “Here I have seen God face to face.”

The next day, Jacob goes to meet his brother Esau. He has heard that Esau is coming to meet him with an army of 400 men (for Esau remembers the ways Jacob has cheated him). Jacob has been praying. He knows that he's been in the wrong and that reconciling with a brother who's bringing an army will be no easy task. So he sends servants ahead to Esau with a lavish offering of peace.

When the two brothers reach each other on the road, after years of conflict and strife, Jacob and Esau don't wrestle, or fight, or wage war. They embrace. They kiss. And both of them weep. Jacob has seen God face to face, and he tells Esau, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” After all those years, and all that conflict, Jacob can finally see the face of God in his

very own twin. The long night of wrestling has transformed him.

Does it feel to you that these last four months have been a long night of wrestling? It does to me. The COVID-19 virus is something we have learned a lot about, but it's also still something of an unknown force, with which we have to wrestle. And it looks like it may be with us for a long, long while. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of the virus. I want my life and routines back; I want our collective life back. Psychologists have coined a term for this feeling: It's called “COVID fatigue.” We're kinda done with the virus. Unfortunately, the virus isn't done with us.

So this may become a much longer night of wrestling than we thought. Four months in, the question in my mind is, *How will we persevere?* Because we are having to persevere with so much else, too. COVID is not the only thing happening in our world. Life continues to go on. Natural disasters continue to take place. Babies keep being born. People continue to die. Systemic injustices of racism and police brutality are not going away.

And certainly each of us, as individuals, wrestle with our own stuff — like anxiety ... and depression ... and addiction ... fear ... conflict ... self-doubt.

Maybe you're in the thick of one of these personal struggles. Maybe you're in the midst of the kind of awakening Hallie preached about last week. Maybe COVID is your biggest concern right now. Whatever you are facing, my question for you is

this: *How do you see yourself persevering?*

And are there ways that the stories of the church might give you strength and hope for the living of these days? Perhaps the story of Jacob wrestling all night long? Or the story of Job? Or the story of Jesus, who endured temptation, persecution, humiliation and the journey to the cross?

I would love to hear your thoughts on perseverance. I would love for you to send me an email or give me a call, and hear your stories of perseverance, and where you draw inspiration and strength. I would especially love to hear how you envision yourself persevering in the weeks and months ahead — because we can, and we will, do this together.

When we persevere, we are transformed. When we face our fears, when we tap into our strength, when we see the big picture and stay faithful to the struggle, we come out the other side as changed people. We may not always get the outcome we want, but there are things in our control — like our mindset, and how we choose to face the challenges before us.

Because it's not what we're up against that defines us. It's how we deal with what we're up against that defines us.

COVID doesn't define us. Our systems don't define us. Our fear and panic don't define us. Our own inner struggles, such as anxiety or addiction or self-doubt, don't define us.

How we deal with them defines us. And it's never too late to start anew.

This is where I see hope. As people of God, we look to the horizon and see the bigger picture. We may *feel* alone, the way Jacob was alone at the river, but we don't have to *be* alone. We can lean in for God's love and strength and grace, and we can lean in to each other, to be in the struggle together.

Whatever the struggle — whether it's a brief time of panic in an airplane, or a night of wrestling by a river; whether it's a long struggle for justice, or a personal challenge that's uniquely ours — God meets us there. And when we face our challenges head-on the way Jacob did, we *will* come through to the other side.

We *will* be transformed. We *will* be changed. And in the process, we may just see God face to face.

Friends, may it be so — for you and for me.

Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.