

Genesis 32: 22-31
2 Timothy 3: 14 - 4: 5
Luke 18: 1-8

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Ever have one of those sleepless nights? No, I'm not talking about working an all-night shift to make a living. Yes, I've done that too, and it's hard to rewire one's self to sleep during the day. But this isn't the kind of sleepless night I'm describing. Then there is another type which new parents often experience when the baby cries for attention every couple hours and stays fussy, refusing to let us rest. They hope to get this young night owl readjusted to a daytime schedule as soon as possible, although I've talked to parents with several children who tell me it's been years since they've had a decent night's sleep. Ah, the joys of family life. But even this is not the type of sleepless night I'm about to describe.

Today's Old Testament story from Genesis really grips my attention. It speaks powerfully to your life and mine, graphically describing personal struggles we have from time to time in the dark of night. This type of sleeplessness coincides with some major shift or change going on in our lives. We feel all stirred up inside. Even positive and promising changes can fill us with apprehension and worry. Perhaps it is the night before a wedding, or an important interview, perhaps some type of surgery and hospitalization. We feel optimistic during the day, and yet when alone in the dark, we wrestle with unexpected thoughts and emotions.

There is quite a list of burdens which can cause a sleepless night... economic worries, unresolved conflict in our relationships, health threats, grief over the loss of loved ones, and our insecurities of how to cope with day to day living. There are temptations and guilt, wherein we wrestle with our consciences in regard to our transgressions. We attempt to rationalize our actions, blaming the circumstances and everybody else whenever there has been a breach in our behavior and values. But there is a still, small voice which will eventually surface in our quiet moments of solitude. I've known people who attempt to fill every waking moment with busy activity to avoid it, leaving the television or headset on for continuous distraction, even trying to drug their minds into an unconscious stupor. But such avoidance tends to make things worse, creating greater problems to wrestle with in the long run.

Wrestling with anger and resentment, rehearsing old injustices and frustrations in our hearts and minds, can be part of one's resolution process. But it can also be a refusal to let go of the hurts of the past, and we become a permanent prisoner, unable to get beyond our desire for revenge. It will not only rob us of sleep; it will rob us of most of life's potential blessings. Let's keep some of these issues in mind as we take a look at this story of Jacob's sleepless night.

Do you remember how Jacob had tricked his blind old father, Isaac, into giving him the birthright blessing, which should have gone to his brother Esau? His mother had always favored Jacob and helped him pull off this stunt. You can imagine it didn't go over well with Isaac and Esau, and Jacob ran away from home to escape their anger. Jacob had to go to a strange land and create a life for himself. He fell in love with a beautiful woman named Rachel, and worked seven years for her father so he could marry her. The father tricked him; however, when Jacob realized the veiled bride beside him was another daughter, Leah. So Jacob worked another seven years to also marry Rachel. Multiple marriages were part of Middle-Eastern culture. Jacob eventually turned this arrangement to his advantage and became wealthy. In some ways, he had arrived, but Jacob felt a desire to finally return home, to face the music and make whatever amends were necessary. So he took his two wives, eleven children and two maids on a journey to his native land. He was worried; perhaps Esau would take revenge, but his desire for reconciliation was as strong as his fear.

So our lesson begins the evening before arriving to Esau's home. Jacob's family cross the river Jabbok and set up camp for the night. Interesting wordplay between Jacob and Jabbok, don't you think? It's like the names are alternate egos of each other, mirror glass images. Jacob somehow isn't ready to cross this river himself and returns alone to sleep on the far shore. Scripture says when Jacob was alone, a man wrestled with him until daybreak. There was no sleep. Nothing was resolved as yet. The morning was about to dawn. The stranger then put Jacob's hip out of joint. This struggle was not without cost. Jacob cries out for blessing, refusing to let go. There is a type of identity crisis, a question of naming. Jacob is told he is no longer to be who he was, but instead shall be called by the name Israel, honoring how he has grown through his struggles. Jacob cries out, "But what is your name; who are you?" There is no answer, but instead the experience and realization of being blessed. Jacob is changed, no longer the same person. He realizes he has been visited by the unnamed presence of God. Jacob may have been wrestling with fear, guilt, worry, fatigue, any number of things. But he discovers, bottom line, he has been wrestling with God. And he names this spot of transformation "Peniel," which means the face of God, and then Jacob marvels how his life has been spared.

I think of the many times we don't feel ready to cross the rivers of our life's journey, uncertain if we really want to be changed or deal with the consequences of our choices and actions. Perhaps we need to seek

moments of solitude to truly face ourselves and the forces within us. Faith isn't afraid of a wrestling match, but believes it will mean growth and blessing. Perhaps we need a good tangle to come to terms with ourselves, with God, and with those in the world around us. There are no personal conversion experiences without struggle.

Jacob was by no means a perfect person. He had done sneaky, underhanded things for personal gain. He also discovered what it was to be victimized. As Jacob began to desire to make reconciliations in his life, he realized God had always been there, in spite of his rebellion. God was at the basis of all the issues with which Jacob wrestled; he had simply not recognized it before.

I remember teaching Confirmation to one of our Eighth Grade classes, and I wanted them to know the definition of the word "Immanuel," one of the titles for Jesus. So, I asked if they knew its meaning... blank silence. I asked if they remembered when they most often heard the name, thinking someone would say "Christmas." Instead, one boy answered, "Oh yeah, I wrestled with him this past week." It was my turn for blank silence. "I did," the boy said, "that was the name of the kid from the other school's wrestling team, Immanuel." I smiled. What "Immanuel" means is: "God with us... how God is in our midst." That is what Jacob had been wrestling with... Immanuel, only it was the first time in his life he realized it. And then he was blessed.

There will be other sleepless nights, whereby we struggle with all sorts of things. It's the perfect time to pray. Could it be when we are getting ready to seek reconciliation, willing to face consequences and allow ourselves to be changed? Will our eyes be opened to see how our sin struggles against Immanuel? God is with us and desires to bring us blessing! Amen.