



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Tryst

Genesis 32:22-31 & Matthew 26:36-46

A sermon by William M. Klein

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<sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>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." <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. (Gen. 32:22-31 NRSV)

<sup>36</sup>Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." <sup>37</sup>He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. <sup>38</sup>Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." <sup>39</sup>And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." <sup>40</sup>Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? <sup>41</sup>Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; <sup>42</sup>the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." <sup>42</sup>Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." <sup>43</sup>Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup>So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. <sup>45</sup>Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. <sup>46</sup>Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand." (Mt. 26:36-46 NRSV)

1

The election of 2016 is behind us. It has left us bruised and battered and far from settled. We have just discovered that the working out of our democracy can be a vile business. The health of our republic has been and is being sorely tested.

In an article he wrote on election day, my friend John Leggett, pastor of Massanutten Presbyterian Church in Harrisonburg, wrote: "It has been a particularly nasty battle. And too many of us know the damage caused by breathing in second-hand vitriol that has filled the air in these recent months. It is time to breathe in the fresh air of hope."<sup>1</sup>

I pray what we've just come through is a lover's quarrel...a tryst from which we will emerge a different people, a better people. I pray this because a whole lot is at stake. And not every tryst turns out well.

Let me tell you what I mean by tryst. My guess is that you think - a secret rendezvous between lovers. I have come across another way to think about a tryst in my devotional readings. I am finding Christian mystics referring to an existential struggle as a tryst. It is this sense I mean when I use the term.

Jacob went away limping from the tryst he had with God at the ford of the Jabbok. He bore a pronounced limp the remainder of his life...an ever-present reminder of his struggle with God. And Jesus...his tryst with God in the Garden of Gethsemane did not allow him to sidestep a grizzly fate. On the cross he bore the scars of heart-breaking betrayal, of unconcealed bigotry, of palpable fear, of cruel hatred.

Every lover's quarrel does not end well. It remains to be seen how we will emerge from this bruising and troubling national tryst. Friends are now former friends. Families and communities are divided. Churches are fractured. Many people in this community and across this nation are walking away from the election limping, bearing deep scars...truly fearful of what is next. Other people are giddy with glee at the election's surprising outcome.

As we look toward the future, restoring mutual trust seems a steep, uphill climb. I am optimistic, though, that since our ultimate loyalty is to the Lord Jesus, the church can take a leading role in helping us keep our heads, learn what there is to be learned, do what we can to mend what has been torn, and be reconcilers so that our words and deeds declare glory to God.

I think my friend John was right. It is time to breathe deeply the fresh air of hope.

2

Someone has said that "hope is a broken heart on the way to becoming a whole heart...that hope is a function of struggle."<sup>2</sup>

The person who said this understood something fundamental about hope. You see, hope, authentic hope, is costly. It is forged out of struggle.

Our two biblical passages for today tell stories with which we can identify. Both Jacob and Jesus engaged in struggles that changed them. Both wrestled with God. How might their stories give us fuel to deal faithfully with the existential struggles we face? How might we see that our struggles are opportunities for renewed hope?

Jacob, his family, his servants, all his sheep and cattle arrive at the River Jabbok, the border to Esau's lands. Esau is his brother - his twin. Twenty years earlier Jacob tricked his father into giving him the traditional father's blessing that was meant to be given to Esau, the first born. Fact is, Jacob stole birth rite and blessing from his twin...and then had to flee because Esau vowed to kill him.

It is with the weight of this history upon Jacob's shoulders that he arrives at the River Jabbok. Standing at the border to Esau's lands, staring across the river at what is his homeland, too, Esau's anger is as fresh in Jacob's mind as it had been twenty years earlier. He has every reason to believe the morrow may be his last.

As a way to seek appeasement, he takes the whole procession that has traveled with him – wives, children, livestock, servants, everything - and sends them across the Jabbok. They will precede him, run interference for him. Lavish gifts will be given to Esau to break down his anger long before Jacob draws near. And if Esau kills them all, maybe he will grow weary of killing when he gets to Jacob.

As they all advance toward Esau, Jacob remains on the shore alone. And night falls...that time that comes around every day when darkness surrounds us again...that time when the light fades and those troubling things the daylight allows us to ignore will not be ignored.

Writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, speaks for us all when she says we don't much like some of the struggles that come our way. But, she goes on to say, "I have learned things in the dark I could never have learned in the light...things that have saved my life over and over again."<sup>3</sup>

Jacob had not yet made peace with Taylor's acquired conviction. As the shadows lengthened and the evening came, and the busy world was hushed...Jacob was alone with his anxieties, his fears, and his self-centered past that had a way of leaving people ready to kill him. Plagued with memories of the way he treated his brother so many years ago and frightened by the prospect his brother will make good on his vow to kill him, he wrestles the night through with an adversary.

Their tryst lasts the whole night through at the border to his brother's land on the bank of the River Jabbok, neither giving an inch. As morning approaches, the opponent asks to be released but Jacob refuses. Jacob says he'll release the angel on one condition – if the angel will bestow upon Jacob a blessing.

As both ease their grip, the angel asks, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he replies. "No more will your name be *Jacob* (which means, the supplanter). It shall be *Israel* (which means, the one who strives with God)." That being said, the angel blesses him and vanishes.

Did you notice what else the angel did to Jacob? Toward the break of day, the angel reached out and struck Jacob on the hip socket putting his hip out of joint. The angel's touch would cause Jacob to limp to his dying day.

So Jacob came out of this struggle with more than a new name. Forever more Jacob bore a limp to remind him of that night – to remind him of the night his life changed forever because of a fierce struggle with God – which really was the culmination of years of struggling with God.

I've often wondered how he dealt with that limp – what the limp did to his soul, his attitude, his spirit. Did that tryst with God make him a hope-filled person? How did the hope-shaped limp affect the way Jacob was a brother to his enemy Esau, a husband to his wives, a father to his children, a master to his servants, and a shepherd to his livestock? How did struggle change him? Save him?

Did his tryst with God turn out well? The chronicler doesn't give us a clue. He may have stayed the same conniving, opportunistic, self-serving weasel he always was. He may have grown bitter and resentful, choosing to play the role of the wounded victim the rest of his life. That's the choice plenty of people make. As I see it, though, if Jacob

made either of these choices he surely missed a good opportunity to let God remake him – to let God “re-clothe him” as the old hymn suggests.

What path do you think Jacob chose? I’d like to think that if asked, he’d say, “Sure, the hip hurts...but it goes with the blessing. Wounds and blessings are a matched pair. Every time I tilt to the right and feel that hot pinch in my hip, I remember my name, *Israel* – the one who grapples with God.<sup>4</sup> In more ways than I could have imagined that wrestling match that dark night on the banks of the River Jabbok saved my life.”

3

The other story we read this morning takes up the tryst Jesus had with God in the Garden of Gethsemane. You may be uncomfortable describing what happened in the garden between Jesus and God as a tryst...but Jesus' words certainly describe a struggle... a struggle so intense Luke described it as being like great drops of blood falling from Jesus upon the ground.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John with him to the garden after they shared the Passover meal. He wanted them near as he struggled with God over his imminent arrest and crucifixion.

Leaving them to watch, he went to a secluded place to pray. “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” Three times Jesus offered this prayer...hoping he could avoid the cup of betrayal and death. When his betrayer drew near, though, it was clear avoiding the cup of death was no longer an option. Soldiers led him from his tryst with God to Pilate, to rejection by his disciples and the crowds, and to his death.

You may say...well, that did not turn out well. And you would be right. For Jesus and surely for God, the garden that night was not a tranquil place, or a pleasant place, or even a beautiful place...though it may have been all of those things under different circumstances.<sup>6</sup> It was a disorienting place before it became a reorienting place. Jesus' struggle with God in the garden gave him the courage and resolve to press ahead...to endure what being a loving person required...to face the unthinkable - i.e., betrayal by his friends, vicious abuse, and a painful death if that became necessary.

Jesus' struggle with God in the Garden of Gethsemane was remembered by the disciples. All four gospel accounts recall the event...which means it had a huge effect upon the disciples and the early church.

One big effect may be the way people of faith, following Jesus' example, turn to God when faced with existential struggle. How many times do you reckon Jesus' own words have been offered as people struggled with God for clarity...“If it is possible, let this cup pass from me...yet it is not about what I want. It is about what you want, O God.”

4

In a sense Jacob's wrestling story is our story in the way we react to the struggles that come our way. Some crippling illness strikes – some hardship befalls – some heart-breaking disappointment occurs - some deep wound alters the future as we imagined it. It is something we will wrestle with forever. The question is this: How will we wrestle? Will we give up...or, trusting God is with us, will we engage the struggle, be a creative participant, and grow stronger?

4

How are you dealing with the deep wounds you bear? How are you helping others deal courageously, productively, and faithfully with the wounds they bear? The wounds you tote with you from life's struggles, those marks bone-deep within your hip or heart or psyche...in what sense have you been able to let God use them and change them into blessings?

Friends, as literal offspring of Jacob and spiritual offspring of Jesus we have a perspective that can help us deal with the national and personal tryst we are having. If we can define this struggle as a lover's quarrel...then there is a lot of room to be hopeful. So let's breathe deeply the fresh air of hope as a witness that Christ is alive in us.

I want to conclude with something else my friend John wrote on election day. I see it as a worthy charge to us.

When the clamor of pollsters is stilled,  
when the commercials and phone calls go silent,  
when the memes and insults are gone,  
when the nation awakes (from all of this),  
the work of living begins:  
to love the neighbor,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
to welcome the stranger,  
to renew trust among the people,  
to hear the voices long silenced,  
to bring peace to the nation,  
to build a home for hope.<sup>7</sup>

Amen.



Lexington Presbyterian Church  
120 South Main Street  
Lexington, Virginia 24450  
[www.lexpres.org](http://www.lexpres.org)

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Leggett, John. 2016. [kairoscorner@johnpleggett.com](mailto:kairoscorner@johnpleggett.com) for November 8.

<sup>2</sup> Tippett, Krista. 2016. *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. NY: Penguin Press, 251. Citing C. R. Snyder (1944-2006), who was professor of psychology at the University of Kansas at Lawrence.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara B. 2014. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. HarperCollins e-books, loc. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Barbara B. 1995. *Gospel Medicine*. Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 113.

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 22:44.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, Mark D. 2012. "What are thin places? Who should we think about them in light of Scripture." See [mark@markdroberts.com](mailto:mark@markdroberts.com). Article cites piece written by Eric Weiner in the *New York Times*, "Thin Places, Where We Are Jolted Out of Old Ways of Seeing the World."

<sup>7</sup> Leggett.