

**Today's second lesson comes from Genesis, chapter 32. Listen for God's word.**

The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

**The word of the Lord.**

**Thanks be to God.**

When I was in college, I used to tell people I was an English major. You know what people say when you tell them you're an English major?

“Huh.”

What I really was – and you’ll never see this coming – was a theology major. You know what people say when you tell them you’re a theology major?

Stuff you didn’t want to know.

They tell you about how the second coming is imminent and that they know for sure their sister-in-law won’t be saved because she buys genetically modified bananas. They tell you about how they think church seems cool but they have a standing Sunday brunch date they can’t blow off. They tell you about how they tried to read the Bible cover to cover once but got stuck somewhere in Leviticus.

Or they tell you about how they grew up Christian, but their home church rejected them when they came out as queer. Or how the Christians in their school growing up told them they were going to hell for praying to Allah. Or how they think all religious people are all a little bit stupid, because it just doesn’t make any *sense*.

I much preferred talking about Beowulf and Jane Austen.

I’ve never met a person whose relationship to faith is uncomplicated. Famously, every happy family is alike, and every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. With faith, the happy believer, the happy non-believer, the unhappy believer, the unhappy

non-believer – we’ve all come our own way to the destinations we find ourselves at, and we’ve all acquired our own scars in the process.

I’m going to be honest – I don’t understand the scripture I just read to you all, this story of Jacob and God MMA-fighting on a riverbank. That’s probably why they usually make people wait until *after* they go to seminary to do this. But I feel such resonance with this depiction of Jacob, grappling with an unseen, unknowable, ungraspable force on the edge of a precipice, his loved ones having gone on ahead of him, just out of sight.

Before becoming a novelist, the author John Green, known for 2010s young adult novels like *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Looking for Alaska*, trained for the Episcopal priesthood. Obviously, that didn’t work out. It was a fieldwork placement as a hospital chaplain that led him to abandon his calling to ministry. He recounts the incident that caused him to leave seminary in an essay entitled “The Practice of Googling Strangers.”

John was working as a chaplain at an ER in the midwest when a three-year-old boy was wheeled in with severe burns. John writes, “The anguish was overwhelming – the smell of the burns, the piercing screams that accompanied the little boy’s every exhalation.”

He recounts being with the parents when they are told their boy might not survive.

“They collapsed, not against each other, but into themselves.” He describes, after the child was moved to the ICU, an ER doctor vomiting into a trash can. “That kid’s gonna die,” she said.

A week later, John dropped out of divinity school. He told people it was because he didn't want to learn Greek, but in reality, he couldn't cope with the memory of that child in the ER. John writes, "I thought about him every day. I prayed for him every day, even after I stopped praying about anything else... Whether I believe in God isn't really relevant. I do believe, however tenuously, in mercy."

Jacob's hip is put out of joint. He limps for the rest of his life. His wound is so severe that it puts the entire nation of Israel off of eating thigh muscle. Jacob strove with God, and he was broken.

A few years ago, John Green finally got the courage to Google the child from all those years ago. He types in his name – a distinctive one – and hits enter. Clicks over to Facebook. And there he is – eighteen years old, he is a member of the Future Farmers of America, he calls his girlfriend "bae" – he is alive.

Mercy. Jacob is blessed. "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

In the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a service organization I spent a year with after college, every new cohort hears the same message. A staff member looks out at a room of idealistic 22-year-olds who believe in mercy. Who believe in hard work and in justice and in solidarity with the least of these. And they tell them: "You will be broken this year. This year will break you. You will see pain and you will see cruelty and you will see monumental injustice." Your idealism will be struck and put out of joint.

But they make a promise, too. They tell these young people, “You will be broken open. The pain of the world will flow in, your idealism will flow out, and you will be made new.” They tell us about a Japanese art called *kintsugi* whereby broken pottery is put back together with gold, more beautiful than before. When you feel yourself breaking down – that is when the light comes in.

John Green’s story, the story of that little boy – it doesn’t end there, with mercy. Years later, on the podcast *Heavyweight*, John Green comes together with the boy from all those years ago – Nick. John is nervous. He’s worried Nick will feel violated by the way his childhood trauma has been a thread in John’s life, both public and private. On Zoom, John and Nick talk about lots of things – the accident, that night in the ER, Nick’s life now. But eventually, John says, “I wanted to get in touch with you to say that I pray for you and your family every night, and I hope that’s okay. If it’s not, I’ll stop.”

Nick thinks for a beat, then replies, “I’m glad that somebody was always praying for me.” But, Nick is ultimately more interested in how the prayers affected John. He says, “Praying for me – I really hope that helped keep the dialogue between you and the Lord fluid and going.”

After that night in the ER, John asked God, “Let me go.” He set down a particular understanding of his sense of call, and took up a new life. But as Nick suggests, John did

not really let go. Through his prayers, he said to God, in effect, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And with the brokenness, the blessings came.

We talk often about our faith role models – people whose faith is a beacon, a steady light in the dark, guiding us with their example. Do we talk, also, about our role models in the struggle? People whose faith wavered or guttered like a candle flame, who walked away or backed away from God, who were willing to say, “I don’t know”? It’s certainly harder.

Jacob, the patriarch, the keeper of ancestral promise, is this type of role model, suffering a life-altering injury at the hands of his God, and yet – still he refused to let God go until the blessing came. John Green observed trauma so unimaginable it made his God feel thin and distant, and yet – he refused to let God go until the blessing came. Nick suffered as an innocent toddler physical pain so great it is beyond fathoming, and yet – he refused to let God go, becoming a blessing himself and a blessing to others. Faith always leaves scars. And yet, and yet.

I would hazard a guess that everyone here has wrestled with God in one way or another. I would hazard a guess that we have all felt pain or fear or anger or confusion that caused us to turn our faces from God, to cry uncle, to cry out, “Let me go.” And yet – we are here. We did not go.

It sometimes feels like I cry out to God to let me go weekly – maybe daily. I think back to 2019, singing “The Summons,” the hymn of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, with my fellow volunteers, thinking all the while of the clients at the community center where I worked. They had come to this country in search of nothing more than safety, and yet too often they found nothing but rejection, racism, and red tape. And God has the audacity to ask me, “Will you use the faith you’ve found to reshape the world around?”? Oh God, let me go. Often, sitting here in this room, I have asked for release, thinking of friends whose experience with the church or with other Christians caused them lasting trauma and pain – and yet God asks me, “Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known?”? Hearing this call, and looking over at the wall there, to Jesus’s command from John 15, “Love one another as I have loved you” – the brokenness has felt irreparable, my failings too legion. Lord, I cannot, I cannot, *I cannot*. Don’t ask me to fail. Let me go.

But here I am, anyway. Because I was on the schedule to teach in Children’s Worship, so I had to come to church. Because Handel’s Messiah was being performed, and I didn’t want to miss it. Because a baby was being baptized, and sometimes you just need to smile. Because this place, like every place, is broken, and that brokenness is as much mine as it is any of ours, and it’s time to roll up our sleeves and keep on fixing.

You are what will not let me go. You are God’s love to me. You turn my scars into blessings.

Good church-going Presbyterians like to joke about Chreasters – you know, those folks who only show up here two Sundays a year, on Christmas and on Easter. Those of us who are here every Sunday without fail (unless we were out a little too late the night before, or if the kids have a soccer game, but that’s only, what, six, eight, maybe twelve Sundays a year?) – we like to joke about the Chreasters and feel a little superior to them. But think about it – if nothing else, two things draw the Chreasters back every year: the mystery of God made flesh, and the mystery of the risen Lord. What could be more at the heart of our ongoing conversations with God than that? What better anchor to tie us back to the great Christian epic?

What is at the heart of your Christian epic? What will not let you go? What transforms your scars into blessings?

In the moments where our faith is thinnest, when our doubts overwhelm us, when our courage fails us, we trust in our God who will not let us go. Not until we are blessed. Not until justice rolls down like waters. Not until we love one another as Jesus loves us. And on that day – who would want to be anywhere else?

Amen.