

When Life Gets Too Big

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Genesis 32:22-30

Hello, my friends. It is sure good to be back. I won't speak for you, but as for me, absence makes the heart grow fonder. When I was away I found myself resonating with the sentiment of the apostle Paul when he wrote to his dear friends, the Philippians, and said, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." I missed you. And I missed our staff. And I just have to say what an incredible staff we have. It's easy to take a sabbatical when you have incredibly gifted, faithful and loving people who are steering the boat. I love coming to work, and I love coming back to work because of the amazing people with whom I get to work. And what wonderful preaching you've heard while I was gone. Our very own pastors, to be sure, and Allen Walworth, Morgan Roberts and Bruce Porter. What a blessing these great preachers are.

You have given me an incredible gift in allowing me to take a little break (not such a little break – 4 months away) from day to day ministry to catch my breath, and catch a new wind for a new season. And I have most certainly accomplished that mission – I have caught my breath and caught a new wind for a new season. A second wind, shall we call it. The Bible talks about the second wind, doesn't it? In Genesis there is the first wind – the ruah – the Hebrew for wind. Bruce mentioned this a couple weeks ago. The ruah that hovers over the deep at the beginning of creation. And then there is the second wind – that comes at Pentecost – the Holy Spirit. The second wind that gives birth to the Church and the new covenant of God with his people. We are the people of the second wind! So back in May I took down the sails a bit so I could catch my breath, but then over the summer slowly the sails went back up and the wait came for a new wind, a second wind to sail into a new season. And it's here! It's always been here, of course, I just have a new sail with

which to catch it. And I think we have an amazing season ahead of us.

I am not going to bore you with the things I got to do while I was away. Suffice it to say – a lot of reading, a lot of writing, a lot of traveling and a bit of nothing. And things did not go exactly as planned. Lots of things happened that I didn't expect to happen, and many things didn't happen that I expected to have happen. But such is life. I read books I didn't expect to read. I went places I didn't expect to go. I saw people I didn't expect to see. And most of all I learned and thought and prayed things I didn't expect to learn, think and pray. Something does happen when you step away from the routine ... from the treadmill ... from the hamster wheel ... something happens when you take a different path for a while. Robert Frost wrote, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." New and surprising things happened on the road less traveled by. I'm not here to explain all that this morning, but I am here to talk about a story in the book of Genesis. A most interesting story from Genesis about Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson to Abraham.

Now as a little background, Jacob was the younger half of a pair of twins born to Isaac and Rebekah. His older brother was Esau. In ancient times it was the oldest who received the family birthright and the father's blessing and inherited the lion's share of the family fortune. All this was to go to Esau. But Jacob was not a very nice brother and managed to trick and connive his way to receiving both the birthright and the blessing. Esau through no real fault of his own – lost it all to his somewhat scoundrel brother. The two brothers part ways the bitterest of enemies until finally the day comes when Jacob has to pay the piper. His brother and tribe are advancing upon Jacob and now Jacob is on the eve of what may be his destruction. And it is at this moment when Jacob goes off on his own. And here is what follows: *Genesis 32: 22-30*.

I mentioned a minute ago about some unexpected things that happened in conjunction with my sabbatical – two that bear mentioning today. The first is upon my return this week I contracted a little virus. Not a big thing – but it's possible I still might be contagious – and so for your sake I need to stay away from you all. So I am going to

disappear during the last hymn and quarantine myself between services. Hugs and handshakes will be given next week. The second unexpected thing that occurred is much more pleasant. It happened while I was away when I had the unexpected chance to have lunch with a man who has been a very important person in my life since I was ten years old. Tom, (I'll call him Tom because he's kind of a humble guy) was one of those guys I looked up to when I was a kid. An elder in the church where I grew up, Tom was a businessman who took his faith and church seriously and lived a good and joyful life and he invested his life in kids like me and scores of others. And how grateful I am to have had lunch with him 50 years down the road to tell him thanks for all he had done for me. We don't often get that chance, and I am thankful I had it. But after waving away my complement, this is what Tom said, "You know, there was time when life was not so joyful. And I didn't really care much about investing in anybody. I was a young husband and father of three with the world on my shoulders and within a very short period of time I had lost my parents and two of my brothers. And I was angry, and I was bitter and I was overwhelmed." Life had gotten too big. "And I happened to be driving down the road past the church where we were attending and I took a sharp, impulsive turn into the parking lot. And I stormed in and walked past the secretary and straight into the pastor's

loving God do this to me – take away the most important people in my life? And so I let him have it. Both barrels. I don't think he knew what hit him."

"Wow," I said, "so what happened?"

"Well to this day I cannot tell you what happened in that office over the next 90 minutes. A lot of give and take. Me giving and him taking, I'm sure. I don't know what happened in those 90 minutes – all I know is that when I walked out of that office I realized I had just volunteered to lead the youth group!

Unexpected things can happen when life gets too big.

We don't really know exactly what happened in that place we now call Peniel. This strange wrestling match between the human and the divine. All we know is that for our friend Jacob life had gotten too big. In other words, life had gotten to be too much. He had come to his moment of truth. Up until that moment he had lived his life as someone else. He had gotten what he had gotten by passing himself off as another. Jacob's past catches up to him – or even worse his brother Esau catches up to him – and now Jacob has to face the music. Jacob has to deal with the past that has caught up to him. Jacob has to confront the reality that he and all he has is pretty much a fraud. And now life was too big, the load too heavy, the

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office. The office of your father. And I was there to give him a piece of my mind and tell him in no uncertain terms that this whole idea of God was for the birds. How could a

consequences too dire. And that is when the story teller tells us that Jacob goes away on his own. He pulls himself

apart from his flock and his family and goes away on his own. And a funny thing happens when Jacob goes away on his own. He finds out he is not on his own. He finds this mysterious being who grabs him and holds him and wrestles him and pulls him to the ground and pins him and wrenches him and will not let him go until Jacob cries out for blessing and until the mysterious being permanently alters him. Tears at his thigh and gives him a limp for the rest of his life. And now all of a sudden Jacob isn't Jacob anymore. All of a sudden Jacob has a new walk and a new name. A new walk a new name. "You shall no longer be called Jacob," says the mysterious being, "you shall now be called Israel – you have striven with God and with humans and you have prevailed." And Jacob calls the place where he wrestles with God – Peniel – which means the face of God – for I have seen God face to face." And as a result Jacob limps away and reconciles with his gracious brother.

Sometimes when life gets too big that's when you see the face of God. And you get a new walk and a new name.

Jack Murphy (aka Murph the Surf) was a thief. Not just a thief, but the thief of thieves. Jack Murphy participated in one of the greatest jewel heists in the history of America. He and his ring of thieves figured out a way back in 1964 to get into the American Museum of Natural History and managed to walk away with the J.P. Morgan jewel collection that included some of the largest and most rare gems in the world, including the Star of India. He and his accomplices were caught three days later and sentenced to three years of prison. But three years left to himself was not enough for old Jack because after release he continued in his unrepentant ways that led him to an eventual life sentence for burglary and murder. Maybe a life sentence left to himself would be enough. And perhaps it was. Because it was in this life sentence – and believe me life gets too big when you're serving a life sentence – it was in this life sentence that Jack Murphy encountered the ministry and preaching and patience of a prison chaplain who grabbed hold and wrestled. Wrestled his pride, his arrogance, his shame, his despair. Give and take. For weeks, for months and years. Give and take. And in some mysterious way the divine grabbed hold of this scoundrel soul and before everyone knew it Murph the

Surf wasn't any longer Murph the Surf. He was a changed man. He had seen the face of God. A new walk and a new name. And the changed man began to do all those things that would convince a parole board that he was in fact a changed man. And to the surprise of many they paroled Jack Murphy far short of his life sentence and to everyone's surprise Murph the Surf was a free man with a lot more of life to live. And sure enough in a matter of months Jack Murphy went back to prison. But he went back to prison as a chaplain to do for others what had been done for him. To tell the good news and to wrestle with those for whom life has gotten too big. He's still doing it today. When asked to explain it all Jack Murphy said, "God has a sense of humor and timing and a style all his own."

God has a sense of humor and timing and a style all his own. Sometimes when life gets too big – that's when you see the face of God.

The truth is, I think, for most of us that there comes a time and a place where life gets too big. The circumstances of life, the mystery of life, the twists and turns of life, the struggles of life, the depth of life – however you want to put it – there comes a time and a place where life gets too big. Maybe it's a time where there is too much to do, or maybe it's a time when there is too little to do, or maybe it's a time when the challenges are too steep, or the diagnosis is too poor, or the grief is too painful, or the circumstances too dire, or the guilt is too shameful, or the disappointment is too overwhelming, the injustices too cruel. There's come a time for most of us when life gets too big – when the armies of our estranged brother are advancing – and we are all alone and we don't know what to do. And there is this urge, right, to take a sharp turn into the parking lot and to dare God to get into the ring. Time for a little wrestling match.

Tommy Bolt, professional golfer, in a tournament missed a four inch putt. And with that he dropped his putter and looked up into the heavens and said, "Why don't you come down and fight like a man." I bet a lot of us have said that in form or another. "Why don't you come down and fight like a man." And maybe that's our most honest prayer. And maybe that's when we finally see the face of god. Maybe that's when the mysterious One shows up. And the mysterious One surrounds us. And embraces

us. And holds us. And squeezes us. And wrestles us. And humbles us – and sometimes even blesses us and changes us. Maybe he even gives us a new walk and a new name. Abram becomes Abraham. Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul. Jacob becomes Israel.

In one of the books I reread while gone – one of the best books I've read in a long time – *My Bright Abyss* – the author, Christian Wyman – editor of *Poetry* magazine – tells of receiving a diagnosis of cancer and with it a devastating prognosis. And in that news life became too big and he became so, so angry. And his anger took him to that place where he felt all alone. And there who should he meet but the pastor from down the street who joined him on a walk to the train station. A walk to the train station. And during this walk young Christian shared his plight – his diagnosis, his prognosis and his pain. And the pastor didn't say much. No pithy maxims. No empty platitudes. But as they parted all the pastor did was put his hands to his heart like this. Just like this. That's all. And that's all it took for Mr. Wyman to say this is the one with whom I must wrestle. And wrestle they did. "We sat together every Friday and argued," he writes ... Nothing was ever really settled ... And yet those hours ... are among the happiest of my life. Grief was not suspended or banished, but entered and answered. Answered not by theology, and not by my own attempts to imaginatively circumvent theology, but by the depth and integrity and essential innocence of the communion between two people." Another way of saying, I guess, a wrestling match.

Why don't you come down and fight like a man? Sometimes that's just what happens when life gets too big. In places called Peniel. Bethlehem. Gethsemane. Golgotha. Pastors' studies. Prison cells. In the communion between two people. God comes down and fights like a man.

And sometimes thieves become chaplains. Sinners become saints. Scoundrels become fathers of nations. Angry men become youth advisors. Poets become preachers. New names and new walks. Because God has a sense of humor and a timing and a style all his own.



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