



University Christian Church - Austin

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MAKING DEMONADE  
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 Gen. 32:22-32

A young woman had two problems common to many university students: low grades and no money. She was forced to communicate both to her parents, who she knew would have trouble understanding. After considerable thought she used a creative approach to soften the blows of reality and wrote:

“Dear Mom and Dad,

Just thought I'd drop you a note to clue you in on my plans. I've fallen in love with a guy named Jim. He quit high school after 11th grade to get married. About a year ago he got a divorce.

We've been together for two months and plan to get married in the fall. Until then, I've decided to move into his apartment and work at our relationship because I think I might be pregnant with his child.

At any rate, I dropped out of school last week, although I'd like to finish college sometime in the future.”

--By this time her parents are mortified!!--

On the next page, she continued:

“Mom and Dad, I just want you to know that everything I've written so far in this letter is false. NONE of it is true.

But Mom and Dad, it IS true that I got a C in French and flunked Math. It

IS true that I'm going to need some more money for my tuition payments.”

Even bad news can sound like good news if it is seen from a certain vantage point. Perception is everything, so often.

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At least perspective was critical in the developments of the life of Jacob as we see when we look carefully at the passage that Roslyn read for us from the book of Genesis. But let us first remember how we got here at all. Do you remember that Jacob was born the second of twins, already in the act of birth, grasping the heel of his brother Esau. So they named him Jacob which comes from the verb, yakab, we means "to catch by the heel, then to trip up, to circumvent, to deceive, and outwit."

Recall the incident of the birthright. Jacob plots to steal his brother's birthright, his status in the family. And Jacob succeeds. Esau sells his birthright for the bowl of hot lentil beans Jacob offers.

Recall the incident of the family blessing. Do you remember that Jacob dressed as his brother, put animal fur on his own smooth skin to imitate his brother's hairy body, and was successful in both fooling and in lying to his nearly blind father so that he, Jacob would receive the once and for all family blessing, again supplanting his brother Esau for whom Isaac had intended the blessing.

What a scoundrel Jacob had become! He was stopping at nothing to get his will and way, and, yet, much to our disbelief, God continues to bless Jacob too. Now, having fled the very understandable wrath of his brother, as we read today's lesson, Jacob is now 20 years later returning to the land of his brother. In the meantime, Jacob has prospered. He has wives and riches, servants and treasures. Jacob has herds and status as the head of his clan. But in his heart, he knows how

he has achieved these worldly goods. He cannot have justified to himself the wickedness of his ways. And on top of that, here comes Esau! The brother who had vowed to kill him when he fled. Esau.... Esau.

Esau was coming with four hundred men. Surely they meant nothing other than Jacob's own life they were after. So Jacob began sending presents on ahead... sheep, cattle, precious things, wave upon wave of gifts hoping to placate Esau who surely must be enraged.

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The scene is set. On the morrow Jacob will have his encounter with his destiny. Fear, guilt, confusion, powerlessness. They must all have marked Jacob's consciousness that evening as he gazed at the ford of the river Jabbok... by the place where the locals claimed an evil river spirit lived that would suddenly overpower and kill trespassers.

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to..."

Perspective is everything. If Jacob knew a similar prayer, it very nearly came true that night of impending death... that night of yet unsuspected birth, when all of his fears and hopes came crashing together.

The man of lonely ambition was left that night alone-- alone again-- alone at the end of his days of running-- alone where the river spirit never slept, and where a man riddled with fear could see his own miserable life pass before his eyes.

"A man" the English translation of the Hebrew simply says, "a man wrestled with him until daybreak..."

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The ancient pre-Biblical legend the locals told, was of a spirit of the Jabbok

River, a demon of great power, almost insurmountable power. And what the spirit did was wrestle with its victims to prevent them from coming across the stream, preventing them from entering that enticing unknown land ahead. Who could prevail against a spirit? Who could wrestle against such a power and win?

As Jacob began his wrestling match with this apparent man... and as the stories of the evil spirit of the river ran through his mind, he must have put 2 and 2 together. He wasn't wrestling a man, but something much, frighteningly much more. Most would simply have given up the fight, admitted defeat.

But for all his miserable attributes Jacob did have a quality that was redeeming him. It was a quality that God had shown partiality for before. Was it this quality that God so valued, that in spite of his shortcomings, God didn't give up on Jacob?

You see, Jacob was a man of incredible tenacity! Some might just call him "stubborn," but he had this amazing unwillingness to let go once he joined a struggle. He latched on as a bulldog to a bull, and no matter which way the animal swings or thrashes, the bull dog's jaws are locked tight and will not let go.

So when this demon of the night had its hold of Jacob it was no easy battle. For agonizing hours the two shadows twisted and fought in a no holds barred to the death encounter.

Then the night demon, the man, God, whomever it was, simply touched Jacob's thigh, and put it out of joint. A simple touch? Yes, at any moment the Adversary had had the power to mortally wound Jacob, but he/it had withheld that power, seeking, instead, to find what Jacob was made of .... pushing him to the limit of endurance to see if he would give up, give in. Any ordinary victim would have given up, especially when the excruciating pain of his hip being put out of

joint racked his body.

Beyond the blinding pain, there would be no way to use one's leg on that side anymore. No strength to pin the other. No adequate defense. But like the bull dog, Jacob latched his arms around the spirit and simply would not let go.

Do you remember the first Rocky movie where round after round Apollo Creed relentlessly pounds on Rocky who can no longer see through swollen shut eyes, who cannot possibly win the fight, but Rocky declares that he will go the distance, even if Creed crushes him in the process?

But like the vampires in the movies, the night spirits could not survive the light of day, so as the morning light approached, suddenly Jacob with no chance of winning the fight, could win, indeed. The night spirit needed to flee before the dawn, so all Jacob needed do was hold on, hold on. And he was good at that!

"I will not let you go, unless you bless me!" cries Jacob as his body racked with pain holds fast.

And finally, he receives his blessing;  
 "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, "heel grabber, usurper of the rights of others",  
 but you shall be Israel [which means, " he who strives with God"]"

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And our Jacob was never the same after that night. The conniving and deceitful man died, and someone new was born. Jacob was transformed by one incredible night that very nearly did him in, but instead, because of his perseverance, made his life new. And if you want the details of the end of the story read in your Bibles in Gen. 33 and following!

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Who are the demons that we wrestle with in the dark lonely nights of our lives? Is our demon, the demon of Sorrow over the loss of an opportunity, over a decision made in error, over the loss of a friend or spouse; a demon that tries to stop us from getting a new start on the other side of the river?

Is our demon a false picture of ourselves that says we are stupid, or ugly, or weak, or foolish, or worth less than others; a demon that whispers in our ear that we aren't worth fighting with or fighting for.

Or Is our demon the demon of Fear that bathes us in sweat and leaves us weak, cold and shivering before all the possibilities of things that might go wrong... so immobilizing us that we feel we couldn't possibly fight with this demon and win?

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The Gospel, the good news, tells us in this story and consistently ever after in the Bible, that every one of these demons, and others that you might name as your own demon, that you wrestle in the dark nights of your soul, the Gospel says that every one of those demons can be beaten.

The Apostle Paul from his prison cell writes in the letter to the Philippians, chapter 1:

"I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel,  
 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ;  
 14 and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear."

"If life hands you a lemon," the old saw goes, take the lemon and :make

lemonade." Or we might say with this morning's lesson, when you have your own private Jabbock River wrestling match with your demon, it's time to make demonade!

Charles Goodyear's lemon was a prison sentence, resulting from a contempt of court citation. While in prison, Goodyear didn't whine and complain. Instead, he got himself appointed as an assistant in the prison kitchen. While there, he began some experiments with India rubber that put him on a dogged 6 year search that would – through his tenacity- take him through times of financial ruin and all kinds of personal trials, until, finally, he discovered a method of vulcanizing rubber that revolutionized our abilities to travel and make innumerable other products. His lemon, a prison sentence, became our lemonade.

Each demon, each trial, each challenge that comes our way.... can be forced to grant us its blessing.... And you don't have to be sinless saint to fight and win. Heaven knows, Jacob was not.

But, like Jacob, we do need to throw ourselves into struggle. This life was never meant to be easy or simple or clean. It is in many ways it is a wrestling match. And how we fair says as much about our nature as it does the power of our adversaries. And, oh, by the way, a lot of times those who seem to be simply our adversaries, may instead become a vehicle to bless us.

Yes, the blessings of God can be ours, but there are times when we must be willing to wrest those blessings out of the problems that they are hiding so well in. For after all, what is a terrible obstacle, but a marvelous opportunity, wonderfully disguised as a terrible obstacle?

The very essence of the good news is here. Every circumstance, no matter how horrible it appears on the face of it, can be used by God to grow us in faith. Believe it, my friends, wrest your blessings from your trials and experience in your own life the heights of Jacob's joy!

Amen!