

TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL

Sermon, August 7, 2011

Text: Genesis 32

"Touched by an Angel" was a television drama series that premiered on CBS September 21, 1994 and ran through April 27, 2003; the series sent CBS's ratings skyrocketing upward, affirming there really is an appetite for wholesome and uplifting television programming (*a lesson many of us wish Hollywood would learn, but that's another sermon*). The series starred Roma Downey as an angel named Monica, and Della Reese as her supervisor Tess. Throughout the series, Monica is tasked with bringing guidance and messages from God to various people who are at a crossroads in their lives. Well, in the episode of "Touched by an Angel" we find in Genesis 32, Jacob is certainly at a crossroads in his life. Only this angel isn't Monica, and this angel has something of a rough touch. To give some background: Jacob had accumulated a great deal of wealth and a very large family these past fifteen-plus years; you may remember he had to flee for his life from his brother, Esau, and traveled some five hundred miles away. We are told in Gen 31:3 God had spoken to Jacob and said, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." So, God is sending Jacob back home, back home to face his fears, back home to face the family he has cheated and wronged, back home to try to set things right with his wronged brother, back home to face the music. However, he was assured he won't be going alone ... God promises to go with him. In other words, God is saying to Jacob, "Go back to those you have cheated, go back to those you have hurt, go back to those you have manipulated ... face them, make things right ... and I will be with you as you do so."

And now Jacob is heading back home. He doesn't get far before he hears his twin brother Esau is heading his way. Now, remember Esau is the reason Jacob left home in the first place. The last words Jacob heard from Esau (*not directly, but second-hand*) were, "I'm going to kill Jacob," which is what Esau swore shortly after Jacob had tricked Esau out of his inheritance by deceiving their blind old Dad. So, when Jacob learns Esau is now riding toward him, accompanied by four hundred men, we are told in verses 7 and 11 that Jacob is (*understandably*) terrified! Nearly two decades he had been on the run from Esau. And now, he's afraid Esau is coming to finally carry out his threat.

You may remember my asking you in a sermon last April, "Have you ever been really afraid?" I meant more than the "monsters under the bed" kind of frights; I meant the kind of fear that just terrifies you, the fear that gives you a sickening heavy weight of dread deep in your heart that says, "I might not make it." Maybe it was a bad diagnosis, or a phone call from an emergency room late at night, or a terrible argument with someone you really need in your life. Whatever it was, it created in you that sense of dread, foreboding and even terror that says, "I'm not going to make it." Well, that was Jacob, here at the shore of the Jabbok. And that was me a week ago Wednesday on a birthday misadventure in the Adirondack mountains.

I spent my birthday last Wednesday ascending Mt. Colden, the 11th highest peak in the Adirondacks, and a mountain I first climbed 31 years ago and five (*maybe six*) times since. I actually led a group of ten high school students up this mountain when I was a fearless (*and foolish*) lad of 29. The route I like to climb is one that is not an "official" trail; it is a trail known to those who live in and/or frequent the region, but is not in the guidebooks. After a six or so mile hike/gradual ascent to the base of the mountain, you come to the base of what's called a "trap dike," a crevasse in the mountain that starts out as a big pile of rubble, but quickly gets steeper. At first it is like ascending a big, ancient stone staircase for a giant; there is also a series of gently cascading waterfalls throughout lots of big, blocky steps with cool, refreshing water cascading by. But it's not long before the climbing gets steeper, and steeper. In fact, it was a lot steeper than I remember, which is probably the result of a combination of age and erosion (*my age and the mountain/dyke's erosion over 30 years*). Usually, I would have taken an "exit" off the waterfall at a certain point and start climbing the mountainside slab, which is an exhilarating and tiring but easily managed upright walk to the summit. At that exit point I would have been about two thirds of the way to the summit. However, I just could not find the exit this time, and had to keep ascending the ever more precipitous dyke. Two times during this later ascent I got really stuck ... and was really, really frightened that I just might not make it. I used just about every ounce of strength, every flexibility of joint, just about every climbing trick I knew by scrambling, shimmying, twisting and turning ... while the silver lining on the dark cloud was that everything in my aging body seemed to work very well (*even the hand with the cat bite that landed me in the hospital July 2!*), and even though I impressed myself a few times, I was filled with increasing foreboding. At this point, though, there really was no option but to keep persisting, to keep ascending ... I didn't think I could pull off some of those acrobats again, especially in reverse. I kept looking for another exit to the rock slab, but just could not find it. After a while, I eventually lost any semblance of a trail as the waterfall ended, and had to bushwhack upwards through very thick, nearly impenetrable pine scrub growth; the elevation at this point was about 4,500 feet. The pine was too high to see over, too thick to lie down in, all I could do was to keep heading upward and keep following my compass bearing. I felt like a fly in a spider's web! For more than two hours I'm breaking off branches in desperation, even uprooting a few shallow-rooted trees along the way as I made very slow progress upward, sometimes only feet or even inches before I had to rest, then break, push, scramble, and claw my way through again. Again, I'm using every bit of strength, every flexibility of joint, every trick I knew. I'm lost AND I'm alone AND I'm feeling increasingly trapped. Fear was grabbing at the pit of my gut, but I knew enough not to let panic set in. I remembered the words of psychologist

Rollo May, *"Humans are the strangest of all of God's creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way."* And that is how we often get into real trouble both in life and on the mountain ... accelerating our pace when we are lost. We also tend to make our worst decisions in that state of mind. Five basic things kept me going: (1) I knew there was no plan B. There was no one I could call (*no cell phone signal at that point*), no one who could come help me (*and even if there were, they wouldn't be able to find me!*), no "taxi" to take down the mountain ... I knew I had to keep going. (2) I knew I had to keep pressing upward, no matter what, and (3) I knew I had to trust my compass. I had taken a bearing of the summit starting out, so I knew the direction I had to go, which, on a mountain ascent, kept me from futile climbing of steep ground to false summits. (4) I took frequent rests and drank plenty of water, which, fortunately, I had packed. Even though it was getting late, and I was increasingly fearful night would set in and I'd be stuck like an ornament in a thick forest of Christmas trees unable to even lie down, I knew hurry would be counterproductive. Fifth, I PRAYED. At first I was praying half jokingly, *"If you get me out of this, I'll be a minister!"* but then the prayers got much more serious and intense.

Well, I did make it, obviously. When I finally emerged from the thicket and looked back, I found I had paralleled a trail for at least fifty yards or more, but could not see it while in the pine. There's a sermon in itself there, but had I known the WAY, and walked in it, I'd have saved myself a lot of trouble! I remember thinking (*even when I'm on vacation, I'm working on my sermon illustrations*) why do we always fight the brambles and the bushes and the perils and other entanglements that are guaranteed to come when we persist in going our own way, when it's a whole lot easier to just follow the One Who not only knows the way but Who is the Way? We can also follow the trails of tradition painstakingly laid out for us by those who've gone before ... but we don't, because sometimes we just can't see the trail, and sometimes we just refuse to follow it ... but again, another sermon. There was a beautiful view at the summit at 7:15 PM (*I had originally hoped to be there by 3:00 PM*); I even had cell phone reception and found four "Happy Birthday" voice mail messages and songs from my parents and my children delivered along the ascent. I quickly headed back down the mountain (*by the trail this time*); fortunately I had packed a head lamp that helped me make the final six miles in the dark and I got to my hotel room 10:35 PM. (*the following link describes the ascent the way it's supposed to be done; this is a little web diary of a small group of much younger adults making this Colden ascent: <http://www.townsandtrails.com/mt-colden-via-the-trap-dike-a-classic-adirondack-hike/>*)

As Jacob and I found, so many of the difficulties in life are self-inflicted; often they come from decisions made out of our insistence to find our own way and go it on our own, which can lead to fearful results. And the worse decisions are often made when we're afraid. It was out of his fear of Esau that Jacob sends pretty much all he owned, all he worked so hard to accumulate, on a great parade toward Esau in an attempt to appease him. Then Jacob even sent his family. *"So Jacob was left alone."* the narrator tells us. Jacob was alone, and I don't think it's just because he's all by himself. I think Jacob is alone in the way that all those who scheme and cheat and use people are alone. Jacob hasn't always been the most upright person, and now the consequences are coming home to roost. As night falls, Jacob is probably at the lowest point in his life. Alone, discouraged, frightened, and he has divided up and given away everything he had. He is alone in the wilderness for what he fears will be his last night ... and it is dark (*and we forget how dark "dark" is in a world without lights*) and that's when this mysterious wrestling match ensues. In a way, Jacob is literally coming to grips with his fears.

While Jacob wrestled all that long night, I don't think he even knew with what or whom he was struggling, he only knew that he would not let go until some good came of it! And that's commendable. Whatever we struggle with, don't let go, don't give up until some good comes out of it! In a way, this fight is the symbol of Jacob's life. He has been wrestling with God for a long, long time. Quite often the struggles and frustrations we have with our relationships, in our work, in our homes are, at root, struggles with God. And until we get that central struggle resolved, until we come to grips with God, we will never resolve the other struggles in our lives. By the way, this struggle is not a sign of Jacob's lack of faith. In fact, it might be Jacob's faith that is creating the struggle. This is the struggle of a man who has heard God's promises but just can't see how they are going to happen. His problem is not just with the very real fears and difficulties of his life, but it is with God, the God who has promised to be with him and to bless him and Jacob has real trouble seeing how He will do that. In the course of the match, Jacob was touched by the angel ... and it blew his hip out of joint. But still Jacob hangs on, refusing to let go until he gets his blessing. The text tells us the "man" says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob replies, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." All Jacob knows how to do is grab hold and not let go.

As Jacob found in a literal sense, when you genuinely encounter God, when you cling to Him for blessing, you'll never walk the same way again! At daybreak the blessing finally comes for the exhausted, broken Jacob in the form of a new name. This new name was not just a new label on an old jar full of the same old deceitful stuff; the contents of Jacob's "jar" are changed as well. He is no longer Jacob, the heel grabber, the trickster. That day, a heel became a healer. That day, a trickster became a treasure. That day, a supplanter was transformed into a saint. His name is no longer Jacob. His name is now Israel. "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." (*the name Israel means "those who struggle, or those who come to grips, with God."*) Jacob overcame because he had learned to come to grips with God; he had learned to cling to God. That's the blessing. It took a few years and a whole lot of mistakes to learn this, but Jacob found the blessings of life come not from scheming and conniving and hustling and grabbing for all he could get. He learned the blessings of life come not from *what* you are holding, but from *Whom* you are holding.

More to the point, he learned blessings come from the One who is holding onto you.