

## WIN, LOSE, OR DRAW

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Genesis 32:22-31

Back in March, I officially threw my hat into the political ring in a bid to win a seat on Nashville's Metropolitan Council. It's called the Metropolitan Council, or Metro Council, because it is like a city council except that it encompasses all of Davidson County. It has been that way since 1963. The Metro Council consists of 35 districts plus five at-large representatives for a total of 40 on the Council. I was running for District 11 which covers Old Hickory and part of Hermitage.

I was the first to declare my candidacy for that seat, but I was eventually joined by three others running for the office. There were four of us in the race.

Of these, one never mounted a serious campaign. Of the other two, one represented the ideals of the far right and the other the ideals of the far left. I positioned myself in the center as a pragmatic moderate. I assembled a team of volunteers (and family) and hired a campaign coordinator. I raised money and started buying things like flyers and yard signs and T-shirts and buttons. We did mailers. I had a Facebook page and a website and even a Twitter account. I bought a second phone line and invited people to call me and they did. I gathered the endorsements of incumbent office holders, the police and fire fighters, and others. It was a full-fledged campaign.

Initially, I had planned to talk about the campaign here in my sermons. I thought that I would have good stories to share that would tie in with our scripture readings each Sunday. I wanted to share with you what I was doing. But it didn't turn out that way. There weren't many good stories, and the campaign was far more difficult than I envisioned. I did meet some interesting people along the way. But mostly, it was long hours of organizing and knocking on doors. In the heat of July, it became quite a slog.

The election was this past Thursday, and, as you know, it did not go in my favor. That's been disappointing but also a relief. I can now return to my old life, and I don't have to check Facebook every ten minutes.

Here at the church, through the summer, we have been working our way through the book of Genesis looking at the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. As I was planning out these sermons, I specifically looked at the Sunday following the election—today—to think about what I might preach. Of course, I had no idea how the election would turn out, but I was amused when I saw that the reading for today was the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. That is perfect, I thought, and I knew then that the title must be *Win, Lose, or Draw*. When Jacob fights the angel all night does he win, does he lose, or is it a draw? And in my

upcoming election, would the result be a win, a loss, or a draw (which would require a runoff election)?

Today's reading from Genesis brings us to the third of four installments of stories about the man named Jacob. Jacob and his twin brother Esau are the two children of Isaac and Rebecca. Esau is the oldest being born first by a few minutes. Esau had reddish skin and was hairy. He was an outdoorsman who loved to hunt. Jacob, born second, had a much different temperament than his brother. He preferred to stay around the house. His mother taught him to cook.

One day, Esau came in from the field ravenous with hunger. He smelled the stew on the fire and demands a bowl of it for himself. Jacob says no and instead asks for Esau's birthright. Eventually, Esau relents and trades his birthright for that bowl of soup.

Later, with his mother's assistance, Jacob tricks his father into conferring his blessing on Jacob by convincing their sight-impaired father that he was Esau. When Esau learns of this, he is murderous with rage and vows to kill his brother. Their mother tells Jacob to flee to Haran, her home, and stay there until his brother cools off.

Jacob leaves Canaan and travels alone to Haran. Along the way, he has that vision of a grand stairway with angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. In this vision, God speaks to Jacob and reiterates the great covenant that God had made with Abraham, but this time specifically including Jacob in this covenant.

Jacob continues on his journey and comes to Haran to the home of his mother's brother, a man named Laban. He goes to work for his uncle. Jacob falls in love with his cousin Rachel, and he asks her father for her hand in marriage. Laban agrees but requires that Jacob work for him for seven years. At the end of seven years, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah. Jacob is upset but agrees to work another seven years for his love Rachel. During this time, Jacob grows extraordinarily wealthy and fathers numerous children with his two wives and two concubines.

Eventually, Jacob is forced to leave Haran after he cons his father-in-law out of some goats. It's been 20 years and Jacob heads home to Canaan with his family and servants and possessions. But to get to Canaan, he must pass through the land of Edom, the territory of his brother Esau. Along the way Jacob gets word that his brother is advancing toward him with a small army of men. Assuming that his brother is seeking to kill him, Jacob makes preparations. First, he divides his family and servants into two parties. His plan is to send them to Canaan by two different routes. That way, if Esau slaughters one group the other might make it back.

Jacob then prepares gifts for Esau—goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. These, he sends ahead toward his brother in waves hoping to appease Esau. Jacob then sends his family and the rest of his possessions across the river while he remains behind all alone. This moment is an echo of twenty years earlier when Jacob was fleeing from Esau and had the vision of God.

This time, there is no stairway to heaven. Instead, a mysterious figure described as a man wrestles with Jacob all night at the edge of the river.

As the night turns to dawn, and the man realizes that he cannot overwhelm Jacob, he strikes Jacob in the hip and dislocates his hip socket. That must have hurt, but Jacob holds on. The man says to Jacob, *Let me go, it is almost daylight.* But Jacob does what Jacob does best; he negotiates. When Esau wanted a bowl of stew, Jacob negotiated for his birthright. Wrestling with this man/angel, Jacob demands a blessing before he will let go.

So the angel figure asks Jacob his name, and Jacob tells him. The man says, *You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.* Just as his grandfather Abram had his name changed to Abraham, so Jacob—to signify his new relationship with God—has his name changed to Israel. Israel means “The one who strives with God.” All his life, from before he was born, Jacob has grappled with people and with God. It is what he does. And he has prevailed. I don’t believe that Jacob is fighting God.

Then Jacob asks the figure his name. But the man does not answer. Instead, he blesses Jacob. But Jacob senses who the man really is and says, *I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.* For the rest of his life, Jacob limped from his encounter wrestling with this angel.

Today, I feel a lot like Jacob. I am limping. For the past three months I have wrestled with a campaign. I could not let go. Election day injured me. At the time, I felt very much alone. I felt like everyone I knew and loved was on the other side of a great divide and moving away from me.

Jacob marked the place of his encounter and called it Peniel, which means “face of God” because in that place Jacob had seen God face-to-face and lived. I don't know if I can name my recent experience Peniel because I have not seen God's face in that experience. But it's still too soon. I'm still hurting, disappointed, saddened, and confused. It will take time for me to process this experience. But my faith gives me the hope that eventually the face of God will emerge. I hope that I will find meaning and purpose in my running and yet coming up short. I hope that in time I will better understand God's plan in this chapter of my life. I will let you know what I discover. But right now, it is a painful dislocated joint that will need time to heal.

But I already know that I am blessed. Although I felt isolated immediately after the election, it did not take long for me to realize that I was not alone. I had a wife and mother and sister and a cousin and friends who were right there with me helping me along. Many others have reached out to express their words of support and to thank me for being willing to put my name into the public sphere.

This campaign makes me wonder about the suffering we all experience—especially those gut punches that leave us gasping for air—the suffering of disease, the suffering of addiction, the suffering of losing a loved one, the suffering of a miscarriage, the suffering of a broken dream, the suffering of dementia, or more. When faced with these challenges, do we give up, or do we fight and limp away and try to find meaning in the pain?

In the Jacob story, we are never told the blessing that Jacob received from the angel. I think that the blessing was not words but simply encountering the face of God, something Jacob could not do until he had wrestled and suffered. I don't believe that God desires that we suffer, but suffering does weaken our defenses and enables us to better see God.

In our normal lives, we tend to be proud and arrogant. We are strong and independent and convince ourselves that we do not need God. Suffering changes that. Suffering makes us vulnerable. Suffering removes the scales from our eyes and allows us to see the truth and beauty that is God. That is a blessing. It is a blessing to look upon our Lord. Why? Because when we see God, we are changed. We become like Moses and we glow just a little bit with the glory of God.

It would be easy for me to be angry about losing. And believe me, I am plenty angry right now. But my faith is guided by stories from scripture—stories such as Jacob wrestling the angel, or the story about Jacob's son Joseph who was left in a pit by his brothers to die, but ended up as the administrator over Egypt. In that position, he saved thousands of lives from starvation. He later told his brothers that it was all God's plan. Or Jesus who, in the garden, prayed that he not have to suffer, yet also prayed *your will be done*.

My faith tells me that there is another side to this story. I will just need to find it.