

Proper 13 Yr A. Sermon.

Injured and Renamed after a God-Scrap

The context for Genesis 32, that we'd just heard, is of the patriarch Jacob in crisis at a boundary. The boundary is both spatial and spiritual. The **spatial** boundary separates territories – that of the past and that immediately before him. The **spiritual** is a boundary choice between a life of lies and a life of integrity. Jacob is leaving Canaan for northwest Mesopotamia, now at a river's edge, the boundary point.

Having fallen out of favor, Jacob leaves Canaan after engaging in reprehensible behavior with Laban, related to him as uncle and father-in-law. While living in Laban's household and entrusted with the husbanding of Laban's flocks, Jacob acted in shady transactions – transactions that benefited himself at the expense of his father-in-law. Wishing to escape the consequences of his behavior, he sought to flee his father-in-law's territory without notice.

In similar character, years before, he left his father, Isaac, and brother, Esau, in bad terms. All his life~ he had engaged in shady and deceitful dealings, leaving him in bad terms with others. Though~ he had gained and lost wealth, and in recent years with his uncle Laban, had become very wealthy, his inner life was a mess.

This week's scripture begins by saying, "*The same night* Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the shallows of the Jabbok." We are led to ask, "*The same night*' as what?" ...Earlier in the

chapter, we learn that Jacob, the great patriarch of Israel, is afraid. He is afraid of his brother Esau seeking revenge.

At the time of this story, Jacob's father, Isaac, is a very old man, nearly blind. But, remember this father, Isaac is the child of promise, born of Abraham and Sarah. Years earlier Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, into giving the patriarchal blessing and inheritance to him, the younger son, thereby, denying it to father's older son, Esau, his brother, to whom the inheritance was due. For this treachery, Esau hated Jacob, and Jacob fled to the land of his uncle Laban (Gen 27).

In this week's scripture reading, Jacob has come out of hiding and has sent messengers to his brother Esau. When Jacob heard the report that Esau was coming to meet him along with ~ 400 men, "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed (Gen 32:6-7)."

Out of his fear, Jacob confesses to God, "I am not worthy of the least ~ of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant."

Jacob continues, "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said to me, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number (Gen 32:9-12)."

After his plea to God, Jacob and his family set up camp for the night; and he sends another set of messengers — this time with many animals as gifts to Esau...*and to the 400 men!*

That brings us to the beginning of our story. Jacob goes to bed, but at some time during that same night, gets up, and takes his two wives, two maids, and eleven children along with everything remaining of his possessions and crosses a shallow segment of the Jabbok River in the direction of Esau's territory.

Sometimes crossing a river is just that: another body of water that must be traversed to get to one's destination. But this crossing seems to be symbolic of the watershed moment that is to come. ...Sometimes water symbolizes those threshold moments when change happens. ...Such a moment has arrived for Jacob!

Though Jacob took his family across the stream to continue the journey, he remained camped along water's edge.

After nightfall while trying to rest, Jacob has a watershed experience. A stranger barges into the camp and attacks him. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Jacob, finds himself wrestling for his life. They wrestle the whole night through. Jacob is unable to best him!

Hah! But, Jacob was reputed to have the strength of four men. So, what was happening here? Was this man superhuman? Was this man a "night daemon" – a malicious force, out to get him? Jacob comes to consider that he is contending with a spiritual force, indeed, perhaps, the God-force itself under the guise of a man.

This was a no-holds-barred conflict. ...Not~ the wrestling we're used to. Their grappling was serious enough that when the stranger saw that he was not prevailing against Jacob, he struck him on the thigh, a serious blow, bringing deep damage to his thigh muscle.

Even after sustaining such a serious injury, still~, Jacob does not give up. Jacob doesn't have his opponent pinned down in pain, crying for "mercy." Neither one is winning. Neither is losing. But, still, Jacob won't let go even if he can't beat him. His refusing to let **up** and let **go** seems to be a threat to the stranger.

What does it mean to hold on? To hold on even while injured? ...To keep in the struggle even when the rules are not fair, or the opponent doesn't play by the rules? ...To hold on even when there's no hope of overcoming the adversary? When no effort or powerplay can influence the outcome?

I am reminded of the Negro Spiritual, "Hold On." "...Keep your hand on the plow, hold on, hold on, hold on!" The Spiritual recounts passages from scripture, such as Silas and Paul imprisoned. There, friendless, facing stoning and possible death, when all seemed lost, they hang on in prayer, singing! ...Holding on to hope in a hopeless situation. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, while singing loudly, the prison door breaks open!

But in the Jacob story, the melee continues until Jacob's opponent says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob does **not**, yet~, let him go. He asks the stranger for his name.

The name is not given. But the stranger does~ ask **Jacob** for his name and receives it. Then the stranger tells him that he is being given a **new**~ name. Jacob shall now be known as *Israel*. (Gen 32:26-28)

What does it mean to be given or to seek a new name? There is another Negro Spiritual with the title, “I Told Jesus It Would Be All Right If He Changed My Name.” In the powerful song, Jesus tells a mourning singer what kind of person she would need to **be** and what would **happen** if he changed her name. She would have to live humble, and the world would turn against her, if he changed her name. The terms are serious, but the singer says, “I told Jesus it would be all right if he changed my name, changed my name, changed my name!”

The name change is symbolic of reoriented behavior, of a reformed heart, of the willingness to accept new challenges, of new possibilities.

In this context of Jacob, the word *Israel*, to which his name is being changed to, means “One who strives with God.” As applied to Jacob, it names Jacob as one who “scrapped” with God. He is a God-scrapper. Jacob’s very name now indicates that his~ God, the God of his ancestors, is one who is willing to enter into the fray and strive with humans.

With this **new name** and a **blessing**, Jacob now releases his hold on the stranger. The blessing was a direct result of the conflict. ...**Think about it!** A wounding~ resulting from serious struggle can actually be a blessing. That struggle and

wounding can lead to looking at life differently, looking at past behaviors and future decisions differently. The experience is transformative.

Eventually the wrestling match ended. Limping from his wound, Jacob leaves the banks of Jabbok and prepares to face his brother Esau.

On leaving the banks of Jabbok, in the words of the theologian Henri Nouwen, **the hope is that Jacob, having wrestled with God, leaves there as a “wounded HEALER,” not~ as a wounded WOUNDER.** The hope is that he will learn from his injury and use his experience to heal others, not to wound~ out of his own~ woundedness.

The trust and hope the story brings is God will continue to strive **with~** and **for~** Israel – with Jacob the *Israel* and the people *Israel*. That hope shall not be in vain.

After the night alone, Jacob rejoins those who crossed the river ahead of him: “Jacob walks bravely in front of his family, bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near his brother Esau.” Jacob has learned to humble himself before those he has wronged – instead of running away. The story continues with the reconciliation of the estranged brothers.

“Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embrace him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Gen 33:3-4).” Jacob responds, “truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God — since you have received me with such favor (Gen 33:10).”

This is good news. [*SLOW DOWN...*] The God who wrestles with us in the **mess** of our lives intends **good** for us. ...True, we may limp on afterwards with the scars of the battle — “limping... but blessed.” We trust in the will and intent of our Gracious Parent, whose “thoughts are higher than our thoughts, whose ways are higher than our ways” (Jer 55:8-9). We trust in a God who wills to wrestle with us until daybreak.... Our trust is well placed. **Amen!**

Resources and References

Sermon Seeds:

- Carl Gregg: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/07/a-god-who-will-wrestle-with-you-until-daybreak-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-genesis-32-for-sunday-july-27/>
- Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome. 1995. *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary, NRSV, Yr. A.*
- Kenneth Bailey. 2003. *Jacob & the Prodigal.* IVP Academic.

References:

- Hold On (Negro Spiritual):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfvLZjofEXA&ab_channel=CheckDEMout
- Changed Name (Negro Spiritual):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C39ltA1nvUc&ab_channel=RobertaFlack-Topic