

**9 Pentecost
August 2, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the Power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The Feeding of the Five Thousand. Interestingly, this story is found in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark there is also the story of the story of the Feeding of Four Thousand. This story is included in all three of our lectionary cycles, so it is an option every year ... every summer. I've preached on the Miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand many times ... but not today.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning is about Jacob wrestling with a mysterious stranger. This is but one small part of a great saga that reaches from Abraham to Joseph ... as in Joseph who was sold by his brothers to a caravan going to Egypt. It is a story worthy of unpacking. This is part of a series of readings that we have been hearing every week since the beginning of our Pentecost season.

So here is the background story ... at least part of it. (This part of the story can be found in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 11 - 33.)

Abram was living in the Ur of the Chaldeans working in his father's shop making wooden idols of pagan gods. One day Abram heard a voice that told him to leave his home to go to a new land where he would become the ancestor to a great nation ... greater than the stars in the sky. So, he took his wife Sarai and followed this voice.

However, it turns out that Sarai was barren ... she couldn't have children ... so Abram began to doubt the voice he heard ... how could he be the ancestral father of a great nation if he had no children ... specifically a son. So Sarai gave Abram her maid, Hagar, so that Abram might at least have some children, even if not by Sarai. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. Well, Ishmael is the ancestor of the nation of Islam. This is why Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called the religions of the Book ... they all look to Abraham as their ancestral father.

However, one day three mysterious strangers showed up at Abram's and Sarai's tent, and they hospitably welcomed them. The three mysterious strangers told Abram that Sarai, in her old age, would get pregnant and bear a son. Indeed she did bear a son ... that son was Isaac. At this point Abram's name was changed to Abraham, and Sarai's name was changed to Sarah.

In this part of the saga there is the vignette about Abraham following this voice ... a voice he recognized as God ... and almost sacrificing Isaac ... but that is another sermon for another time.

When Isaac was grown, and the time came for Isaac to marry, Abraham and Sarah sent a servant back to their home country of Haran to find a wife. Rebekah showed up at the well to assist Abraham's servant as Abraham had said she would ... and so Rebekah became Isaac's wife. We heard this story several weeks ago.

In due time, Rebekah had twins ... Esau and Jacob. Esau came out first and therefore inherited the right of firstborns. As the twins grew it was obvious that they were very different. Esau was big, hairy, and blunt. Jacob was small, fair, and conniving. Esau was a hunter. Jacob was a homebody. Esau was Isaac's favorite. Jacob was Rebekah's favorite.

One day Esau came home from hunting and was famished. Jacob had just made a lentil stew. Esau demanded to have some. Jacob made a deal with Esau ... he could have some stew in trade for Esau's birthright. Esau agreed. However, Jacob needed the blessing of his father, Isaac to ratify the deal. Knowing that Isaac would never give away Esau's birthright by willingly blessing Jacob, Rebekah and Jacob plotted to deceive Isaac.

Isaac ... in his advanced years ... was basically blind. So Jacob ... with his mother's help and complicity ... put on Esau's clothes, covered his hands and neck in the skins of a young goat to mimic Esau's hirsute body, and took Isaac some savory game to eat. Isaac asked Jacob his name, and Jacob answered, "I am Esau, your first born." Isaac said, "Your voice is like Jacob's, but your hands are like Esau's." However, in the end, Isaac gave Jacob the blessing he needed ... the one that rightfully belonged to Esau.

Obviously, this set up great animosity between Esau and Jacob. The Bible text says that Esau "hated" Jacob ... and Esau swore he was going to kill Jacob. So, Jacob escaped the wrath of Esau by running away to the land of his uncle Laban's home ... Laban was Rebekah's brother. When Jacob arrived in Haran ... the land of his uncle Laban ... he stopped at a well and asked some shepherds about where he could find Laban. At that point, Laban's daughter, Rachel showed up at the well, and Jacob was immediately smitten.

At little side note: This well where Jacob met Rachel is the same well that Abraham's servant found Rebekah. It is also the same well where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman in John's gospel.

Anyhow, Jacob is warmly welcomed by his uncle Laban. After a month, Laban asks Jacob what he would like in return for the work he was doing. They made a deal ... Jacob would work for seven years in exchange for the hand in marriage of Laban's daughter Rachel. Seven years go by, and Laban throws a wedding feast. Jacob gets a little tipsy, then takes his bride into his tent for the wedding night ritual. However, when he woke in the morning he found that he had slept with Rachel's older sister Leah, not Rachel.

Jacob was obviously angry about being deceived by Laban. Laban defended himself, "This is not done in our country ... giving the younger before the firstborn." (Notice the twist on the

Esau/Jacob firstborn birthright deception.) So, Laban proposes that Jacob works another seven years, then he could have the hand of Rachel.

Now, a part of this story that is not read on Sunday mornings has to do with Jacob's children ... children by his first wife Leah, by Leah's maid, then by Rachel, and by Rachel's maid ... eleven in all. Children by two wives and two concubines ... this is one of the justification that some Mormon sects have to support polygamy.

After Jacob married Rachel he worked for Laban another six years. During that time, Laban allowed Jacob to build his flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle. But, unbeknownst to Laban, Jacob was pulling some tricks of animal husbandry and hoodwinking Laban in the process. Jacob's flocks and herds grew as Laban's flocks and herds shrank.

So, that brings us to the story today. When Laban found out that Jacob had deceived him, Laban banished Jacob and his family, and Jacob decided it is time to go home and face his brother Esau. Jacob sent scouts out to see if he was going to be welcomed at home, and they came back saying that Esau was on his way to meet Jacob ... but with four hundred men.

So, at the River Jabbok ... a tributary of the Jordan River ... Jacob sent his wives, maids, children, other servants, and all his flocks and herds across the river, and he remained behind ... alone.

Remember, Jacob is returning to the place of his birth after twenty years away, and steeling himself to reunite with Esau, the brother whose life he had ruined through deceit and manipulation. Jacob had no idea how Esau would receive him, and he was afraid. After sending his wives, his children, and all his possessions ahead, across the river, Jacob decided to spend the night alone.

The text doesn't tell us why Jacob decided to remain on that side of the river. Maybe he wanted to pray and beg God for help. Maybe he wanted to scheme and plot before facing his brother. Maybe he was overwhelmed by anxiety, and wanted to hide. Or, maybe he was just plain terrified ... and hoped that if Esau saw Jacob's family first it might diminish his anger.

We don't know. All we know is that Jacob was isolated and vulnerable in a way he had not been for a long time. On this lonely night, he couldn't hide behind his large flocks, or his many servants, or his large and complicated family ... they are all on the other side of the river. Jacob was alone in the dark ... alone in a desolate place ... until all at once he was not alone. A nameless, faceless mysterious stranger leaps out of nowhere, and throws him to the ground.

Did this story actually happen? I don't know. But, I do know that I know this story to be true in my own life. I know the story is true because there have been times that I have found myself alone ... in the dark ... in a desolate place. And, in that menacing darkness, I have done solitary battle with something mysterious I didn't recognize as God until much, much later. And, from my conversations with people I have encountered in my ministry, I know this experience is true for others as well.

Scholars have debated for years about “what’s really happening” in the Jacob story. Was Jacob attacked by robbers? Did he have a panic attack? Was the mysterious stranger really Esau in disguise? For me, it really doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter because all of the classic battles of our lives ... our battles with guilt ... or shame ... or fear ... or doubt ... or grief ... I believe that all those battles are ultimately battles with God. All those relationship struggles with family and friends ... with our community and culture ... even Church ... are ultimately battles with and about the divine presence of the holy.

It is with that sacred divine presence that we fight the fights that bend, break, and remake us. It is in the presence of God that we face the demons within and around us. It is this divine presence that brings us to the edges of our own strength so that finally we’ll surrender, and allow ourselves to be saved. Whether we recognize the mysterious stranger as God or not, God is always the one we struggle with. God is always the one who battles with us ... not for our detriment ... but for our transformation.

As the night wore on, and the mysterious stranger saw that Jacob had no intention of giving up, he stuck Jacob on the hip socket, dislocated his hip and causing him to limp.

We live in a culture that celebrates success and scorns defeat. But sometimes, defeat is a mercy. Defeat is what saves us. What I carry away from the story of Jacob’s wounding is the troubling but solid truth that blessing and bruising are not mutually exclusive in the realm of God. We can limp and prevail at the same time. We can experience healing in brokenness. If I want to engage with God, then I must expect that I will be changed in the process ... and not always in ways that are painless or comfortable or easy. I can’t dictate the terms of blessing. I can’t say, “I want the blessing but not the limp.” Sometimes, the blessing is the limp.

As dawn broke, the mysterious stranger asked Jacob to disengage, and Jacob, tenacious as ever, said no: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So Jacob hung on, waiting for something good to happen, and the stranger consented to his request for a blessing. But first, he asked Jacob the terrible but essential question upon which blessing is predicated: “What is your name?”

Why “terrible?” Well, consider the last time in the story that Jacob wanted a blessing, and was asked this question. He was twenty years younger, and he was standing in his disabled father’s tent, wearing his brother’s clothes. Isaac, wary and suspicious, was afraid. Isaac knew the immense power of blessing, and he did not dare bestow it on the wrong person. So, Isaac asked ... once again ... who was standing in his tent. And Jacob ... the trickster Jacob ... manipulative Jacob ... deceitful, selfish Jacob ... looked into his father’s failing eyes, and lied. “I am Esau, your firstborn son.”

Twenty years later Jacob got a second chance. Still groaning in pain, he heard the question leave the stranger’s lips: “What is your name?” What is your identity? Who are you?

I wonder if this is a question God asks us, too, each time we wrestle with him. Not because God doesn't know who we are, but because so often, we don't know who we are. Or, we do, but we don't want to face what we know. What is your name? Who are you? No, who are you, really? Who are you at your core?

What Jacob learned that night by the river is that the big, terrible, life-changing questions we dodge and skirt and evade and ignore return to us again and again and again until we find the courage to look them in the eye and answer them honestly. I'm pretty sure that if Jacob had lied to the mysterious stranger ... as he had done to his father ... the battle would have continued for another day and night ... or for many days and nights. God would have challenged Jacob's destructive self-deceptions over and over again until he finally surrendered to the uncomfortable truth: "I am Jacob ... the deceiver ... the schemer ... the conniver. I am the man who lied to my father, cheated my brother, manipulated my father-in-law, and ran away from every problem I created. Yes, it is me. I am Jacob." It is only when we name the worst that we can relinquish it. It is only when we confess the ugliness within and around us that God begins the holy work of transformation.

"You shall no longer be called Jacob," the stranger told his weary opponent. "You shall be called Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." A new name that essentially guarantees him a lifetime of holy struggle. "You shall be called Israel." Meaning ... you shall spend the rest of your limping life wrestling with God ... contending with God. Say goodbye to the trickster ... from here on out, you are the wrestler.

Wrestling, as it turns out, is not an irreverent thing, because it's the opposite of apathy ... the opposite of quitting ... the opposite of complacency. To fight is to stay close ... to keep my arms wrapped tight around my opponent. Fighting means I haven't walked away from God ... and God hasn't walked away from me. It means we both have skin left in the game.

This is both a challenge ... and an invitation ... to those of us who think our relationship with God has to be smooth and pretty all the time ... because it doesn't. The God of Jacob delights in those who strive with him. The opposite of loving God isn't fighting him. The opposite of loving God is not caring enough to fight. So don't worry if you're wrestling. Wrestling and struggling can be our best protection against spiritual apathy. Wrestling keeps God relevant in our lives ... it keeps God personal and a force to reckon with, rather than a dusty relic we stick on a shelf. After all, in my human relationships, I don't bother getting worked up when I don't care. I don't fight with people or causes for which I have no passion. To wrestle and struggle with God is to insist that God matters.

As this portion of the story concludes, the dawn broke, and it became Jacob's turn to rename the place of his wounding. He called the muddy wrestling ring, "Peniel," saying, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." From this detail, I understand that it's important to remember and to name the places where God shows up and contends with us ... these "Peniels" where God meets us in the darkness ... these places where we lose and find our

true names ... these places where Mystery wrestles us towards salvation ... these places where we exhaust our own strength, and finally collapse into God's.

These are the holiest of places, the places that leave us blessed and limping all at once. May we brave these places over and over again, because God is in them, ever ready to meet us. May we prevail over them each time the night fades and the sun rises. May our aches be the testaments to our joy.

The Abraham saga ... from the Ur of the Chaldeans to Joseph being sold into slavery to a caravan going to Egypt ... is an amazing story of a complicated family full of twists and turns ... love and hate ... trust and betrayal. And, in the midst of the long slog through Genesis are these gems of the struggle of an evolving faith. The story ... when unpacked ... is our story as well. It can be life-changing.

Amen.