

Foundational Stories Series
Jacob Becomes Israel, One Who Wrestles with God
Sermon on Genesis 32:1-32 (8/9 & 8/10/14)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Most holy God, grant that what we speak with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We all have “defining moments or experiences” in our lives, right? Those moments that put everything else in perspective – those experiences we go back to in our minds and hearts, over and over again...events or periods of time that shape us in ways we can never fully understand.

Survivors of violent experiences often live with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or can have other experiences that trigger a post-traumatic response – a physical and emotional reaction to a current event that, for some mysterious reason, takes them right back to the prior trauma.

These types of traumatic experiences are dramatic “defining moments” for many survivors of violence. And, as we’ve been going through this series about the beginning of the Israelites – the Jewish people – it has struck me that, once again, the land of Israel is embroiled in violent conflict. The conflict over that holy land seems never-ending.

I will not here say much about the constant battles between factions of Israelis and Palestinians...that is a hot-button topic that I neither know enough about to say much about intelligently, nor have I been here at McCabe long enough to publicly speak to such a big issue of global politics.

What I will say is this: the history of that land is confusing and people’s ties to it run deeper than most of us could ever begin to imagine. That holy land is home to the world’s three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three find their very heart and soul tied to that land. The constant, violent conflict on it is not only devastating and deadly to its people, it is also nothing short of spiritually tragic.

// //

At any rate, while we here at McCabe are not living in the midst of widespread, community-wide violence...and, while many of us may not have violent trauma in our present or our past...most of us – perhaps all of us – have other kinds of experiences that shape our behavior or perspective, for good or ill.

For example, I did not make it into the top choir at my college my freshman year and I know for a fact that I let that disappointment negatively shape my entire year:

I had been counting on making it into that choir and I had assumed that was where I would find my college friends.

When I didn't make it into that choir, I was so bitter about it I didn't seek friendships elsewhere that year, and thus, did not have a particularly fun or memorable start to my college career.

I ended up making it into the choir my sophomore year and, after being part of the choir for a while, I realized how the experience of not making it my first year had shaped me.

Of course, as I said, it shaped me in negative ways at first with bitterness and, I must admit that it also shook my confidence to the core – so much so, in fact, that I think I still feel its aftershocks today when I find myself doubting my abilities in sometimes crippling ways. But, it shaped me in positive ways, too, because I was very sympathetic toward others who didn't make it into that choir. (And there were lots of us!)

It also offered me a hard lesson in humility – the experience of not making it my first year taught me I wasn't always going to get what I want and that I should probably rethink things if I thought I “deserved” something more than others.

Do I wish I had made it into that choir my freshman year of college? Of course I do. However, eighteen years after the fact, I'm able to say that, even though I wish I had made it my first year, I'm actually glad I didn't.

Because, in some mysterious way, God used that negative experience to help shape me into the person I am today – and I kind of like that person!

//

Perhaps as I'm talking about this, you've begun to think about those experiences in your own life – big or small – that have formed and shaped you in powerful ways.

And while everything we experience in this life forms and shapes us, some things make more of an impact – or are more defining – than others.

Well, in many ways, our story from Genesis chapter 32 – the story of “wrestling Jacob” – is *the* defining story for the Jewish people, the people of Israel... because this story is the story that gives them their name. And whether it's the name our parents gave us, the nickname we were given on the school playground, or a name or label we give ourselves, names define us, right?

// //

This is now the sixth week of our *Foundational Stories* series, a series that began with the story of Creation in Genesis 1, that introduced us to Abraham and Sarah, that introduced us to Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, with his wife, Rebekah, and their twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Last week, we met Jacob's mother's brother, Laban,

and we heard the story of how Jacob came to marry both of Laban's daughters – Leah and Rachel.

We've come to chapter 32 of the book of Genesis and, as I've done the previous weeks, I want to remind us of what's happened so far in Genesis...

Back in Genesis chapter 12, “the Abrahamic Covenant” was formed. “The Abrahamic Covenant” is a three-fold promise that God made to Abraham. God had invited Abraham to follow, Abraham chose to say “yes” to God, and then God promised Abraham three things: land, descendants, and blessing – not just that Abraham and his descendants would receive blessing, but that the world would be blessed through them.

If you remember one thing from the many, many weeks of this sermon series, I want it to be this three-fold promise between God and Abraham because this promise is the foundational promise for the Jewish people. And, because Jesus was Jewish, knowing this foundational promise of the Jewish people is extremely important for our own life and faith as Christians.

So, in Genesis 12, God made this three-fold promise to Abraham...and God continued the promise through Abraham's descendants – first through Abraham's son, Isaac, and continuing through Isaac's younger son, Jacob.

Now, Jacob is someone that we are meant to have a kind of “love-hate” relationship with. He's the protagonist of our story...but he's also tricky.

Jacob was the younger of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons, but right from the start, Jacob did everything he could to come out ahead. In fact, his name - “Jacob” - means “heel” because he was literally grabbing at his brother Esau's heel in an effort to be born first.

Since he was *not* born first, but since he still wanted everything that came with being the firstborn, Jacob tricked his brother Esau into giving him his birthright – which would likely have been a larger portion of the family inheritance.

Then, years later – along with their mother, Rebekah – Jacob tricked their father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the special, fatherly blessing Isaac was reserving for Esau. Having been tricked twice by his younger twin, Esau was enraged to the point of Jacob having to flee for his life to go live with Rebekah's brother, Laban, in another country.

While living with Laban, Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel... Laban promised Jacob he could marry Rachel in exchange for seven years of work.

However, after the seven years of work, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. (I think only God knows how Laban managed to pull that off...) In the end, Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel as well,

in exchange for another seven years of work.

Where we left off last week in chapter 29, God had compassion for Leah because Jacob did not love her – so God allowed Leah to become pregnant while Rachel remained barren.

For today's story, we've skipped over three chapters of Jacob's story. I'd recommend you read those chapters on your own sometime, but here's the gist of what happened in them:

Leah had four children with Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel became so jealous of these children – and so upset about her inability to conceive – that she gave Jacob her maid, Bilhah, and asked Jacob to have a child with her. So he did. And they named that child Dan. Then Jacob had another child with Bilhah and they named that son Naphtali.

When Leah saw that Jacob was having children with Rachel's maid, Bilhah, she got jealous and she, then, gave Jacob *her* maid, Zilpah, and Jacob had a son with Zilpah that they named Gad. Jacob and Zilpah then had a second son together whose name was Asher.

So, now the number of Jacob's wives was four and the number of Jacob's children was eight. But he wasn't done yet.

After some strange business with mandrakes – a root plant that's apparently known for being an aphrodisiac – Leah and Jacob had three more children: two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter named Dinah.

Then, finally, after having eleven children with Jacob's three other wives, God enabled Rachel to conceive. Jacob and Rachel's first child together was Joseph – about whom we will learn much more in the next couple of weeks.

Then, after the saga of which wife Jacob had which child with, we learn about how he left his father-in-law Laban's household. Before leaving Laban's household, however, Jacob had managed to become extremely wealthy with lots of very hearty livestock.

And, when Jacob, his four wives, his twelve children, their servants, and all of their very healthy livestock departed from Laban's household – in secret, no less – the livestock that was left behind for Laban was all of the not-so-healthy livestock. Plus, Rachel managed to steal some very important household items from her father before they left.

So...Jacob and Company did not leave Laban's on the best of terms – something that's now officially become a pattern in Jacob's life. He left his own household on bad terms, and now he left his father-in-law's household on bad terms...and secretly, to boot.

When Laban discovered that Jacob and his family had left, there was a three-day journey between them. But Laban pursued them anyway in an effort to find Jacob and to find his precious household items. However, when Laban caught up to Jacob's clan, Rachel kept the items hidden so her father never did discover where they went. In the end, Laban and Jacob made peace and Laban returned home.

Now, Jacob's plan in leaving *Laban's* household was to return to his own family home. However, on that journey, he knew it was likely he would encounter his brother Esau. And, even though years and years had passed since Jacob escaped Esau's rage, Jacob was still extremely concerned about seeing his brother again.

In an effort to win his brother's affection, Jacob sent nearly all of his livestock and many of his servants to Esau as a kind of peace offering.

Then, Jacob, his wives, and his children all hung back a few days to make sure the gifts arrived at Esau's before they did. And *that* is where this story is when Jacob had the mysterious wrestling match in today's reading from chapter 32.

Thankfully, today's story does not take very long to recap: Jacob was alone for the night, preparing to meet his estranged brother, when a mysterious stranger wrestled with him all night. When neither of them had won the wrestling match by daybreak, the mysterious stranger struck Jacob on the hip and demanded that Jacob let him go. At that point, again, the story reads this way:

“You can't go until you bless me,” Jacob replied. Then the man asked, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. The man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have wrestled with God and with men, and you have won. That's why your name will be Israel.” Jacob said, “Now tell me your name.” “Don't you know who I am?” he asked. And he blessed Jacob. Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and I am still alive.” So he named the place Peniel. The sun was coming up as Jacob was leaving Peniel. He was limping because he had been struck on the hip, and the muscle on his hip joint had been injured. That's why even today the people of Israel don't eat the hip muscle of any animal.”

//

The name “Israel” means “One who wrestles with God.” So, in this strange little story – in the midst of his very real family drama – Jacob wrestled with a mysterious stranger that, according to the story, turned out to be God himself. And, though this same God had already promised blessing upon blessing to Jacob's family, Jacob demanded more.

With the blessing Jacob received, he also got a new name...and a wounded hip – a strange mixture...

//

I think we all know – as Jacob surely did – that life in this world is full of pitfalls...full of family drama, full of past hurts and resentments, full of fear about the future,

full of dreams and promises yet to be fulfilled. Yes, in the midst of the abundant joy this life can bring us, we all know it can also bring pain and grief...we all know we can get wounded in the process.

// //

As I have said in previous sermons, the single most important thing we can do when we read the Bible is to search for what each biblical story is telling us about God. Yes...in every story in the Bible, we learn a whole lot about ourselves, too, but, when it comes to reading the Bible, first and foremost, we must look for signs of who God is and how God chooses to be in relationship with us.

And in today's story, we see evidence of a God who wrestles with us...a God who *takes it* when we offer demands...a God who lets us toss and turn, who lets us push and pull.

I don't know about you, but, to me, that is incredible good news.

I find it both challenging and comforting that, when I'm struggling in my own life or when I'm struggling with things that are happening in our world, I can go to God in prayer and we can wrestle it out together.

I also love that I can demand that God answer my prayers in certain way. That is also amazing good news to me.

But – thanks to today's story – what I have to remember is that wrestling matches with God can leave me limping. Despite my demands, God might not answer my prayers the way I want them answered – and it's painful when that happens, isn't it? It sort of leaves you limping,...

// //

The piece of the story we did not read today – and that we won't be reading in worship – is what happened next for Jacob, now "Israel." Recall that Jacob's holy wrestling match occurred right before he planned to see his estranged brother for the first time in years. Jacob had sent incredibly generous gifts ahead as peace offerings...we know he was worried because he knew how badly he had treated his brother.

But what happens when they finally see each other is really quite beautiful: Esau was thrilled to see Jacob and graciously welcomed him into his presence – he even admitted there was no need for the peace offering.

Through all the wrestling in his life, Jacob learned something about being a humble servant: he bowed before his brother, thus admitting the error of his past ways...and his brother received him with mercy and love.

// //

Jacob's story is a crazy, convoluted story filled with just about every mistake a person could make in this life. Yet Jacob's story is also a story of redemption and healing. And I think that's where the real blessing lies: in the redemption and in the healing.

Because, even though he left his holy wrestling match with a permanent limp, he left ready to reconcile with his brother. He left assured of God's presence in his life and he left trusting that God's presence mattered more than anything else.

That, my friends, was good news for Jacob thousands of years ago...and it remains amazing good news for you and for me – this day and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.