

Sermon – St. Barnabas’ Episcopal Church, Florissant
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Genesis 32:22-31: But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The last few weeks, our old testament readings
have been following the story of the sons of Isaac.

Jacob and Esau the twins.

We heard about Esau, (the older brother by maybe 20 minutes)

And how he sold his birthright to his younger brother
(born 20 minutes after him).

That younger brother later stole the blessing from his older brother too.

He did this by lying to his blind father about who he was.

Then we heard how Jacob ran away
because he knew his brother was mad enough to kill him.

He slept in the wilderness, and dreamt of a stairway to heaven,

He awoke knowing that God was still with him
– even though he’s a rascal.

Then we heard about his years of toil,
only to be fooled by his uncle,
and ending up married to the wrong woman.

Rachel and Leah, along with their maids,
Bear him thirteen children. One of them is Rachel’s
Oldest son, Joseph.

We’ll hear about these brothers more next week.

Today, in the final story of Jacob
in our lectionary for this year,
we’ve heard about Jacob’s effort to bring his family
back to the land God has promised.
It’s about Jacob’s effort to return home.

It’s not an easy journey.
Most homecomings are difficult

Even when it's what we want most,
Sometimes we simply can't find our way.

I'd like us to use this story to think about
how we can help our family and friends
in those time when they are struggling;
when they are longing for restoration, for wholeness,
and for home – yet all they can see is a river crossing,
a passage through which there is no hope.
How do we share that journey? How do we offer support?

Jacob knew he needed a change of scenery.
He had been a dirty trickster to his brother,
and to his uncle.
He was an opportunist who had fooled others
in order to get the advantage.
By the time he arrived on the edge of the desert
– almost home to Palestine,
he had gotten really rich off of his efforts.
He had so many flocks of sheep, goats,
camels and oxen that he needed a huge staff to tend them.
He had twelve children and two wives.
And he had a deep and abiding sense
that God was going to bless him.
He was special and he knew it.
I'll admit that I am not all that keen on people like that.
Overly confident, overly privileged;
Blind to his own vices.

Jacob's blindspots were about to be revealed.
Jacob arrived on the edge of Palestine.
Esau's home turf.
Jacob sends messengers to tell Esau of his arrival.
When they return they tell Jacob,

Your brother is on the way and
he's got 400 fighting men with him.

Uh Oh.

This doesn't look good.

Maybe all that trickstering is going to catch up with him.

But Jacob had a plan.

He'll bribe Esau with gifts.

He sends a crazy amount of goats, sheep,
camels and cattle to his twin.

In waves, these herds are sent off to meet Esau and his army.

Jacob hopes this will be enough
to save him and his family.

But it's a huge financial loss.

I wonder how that felt watching so much of his money
Get herded away.

I wonder was there someone there to console him?

Perhaps his friends were busy.

Perhaps his family members were too overwhelmed.

When those we care about experience crisis,

It's not the time to avoid them,

it's the time to be *more* present,

More caring, more honest in our concern.

Maybe it will just be a card, a text message
or a quick phone call.

But maybe it may mean taking the time to really listen,

To offer financial or spiritual support.

When my brother died.

I was so shocked I couldn't think.
My friend came over and packed my suitcase
She just did it, she didn't ask,
she just came over
and said I'm helping you pack.

Jacob didn't have a friend like that.
As he watched his servants disappear over the horizon,
Each with their huge bribe for Esau,
There was a knot in Jacob's stomach.
Genesis 32:7 Jacob felt great fear and distress.

What if it didn't work? What if Esau killed them all.
As much as Jacob wanted to believe he was special,
Jacob knew in his heart,
he was a scoundrel.
He deserved his brother's wrath.

When the last flock disappeared over the horizon,
the sun was low in the sky.
The text says, he moved with his family
and possessions to the edge of a river.
And by the time they got there, the sun had set.
Night had come.
With all of our electricity and headlights
and streetlights, it's easy to forget
how dark nighttime can be.
darkness flattens things out.
We walk into things, we lose perspective.
Sounds seem louder and more ominous,
and our imaginations go wild.

Imagine this river Jabbok
Probably there was a cacophony of sounds...

frogs croaking, cattle getting restless,
perhaps the sounds of carnivores
barking and roaring at the smell of the remaining cattle.
Jacob was already afraid. Night just magnified it.
In the night, he moved his family across the river.
No easy thing.
Certainly it indicated how frightened he must have been.
Crossing rivers at night is not a good idea.
But when the enemy is on one side, and not the other,
better to get to the safe side sooner rather than later.

And then, Jacob stayed on the enemy side.
All he had, and all he loved, were safe.
If Esau and the army arrived,
he would be alone to be confronted and killed.

And in the deepness of night, the enemy arrived.
Jacob met the wrestler certainly thinking it was his twin – Esau
All night they wrestled.
Have you ever struggled with something
and thought it was the enemy you were fighting?

When someone we know and love is wrestling,
When they become isolated,
or unable to change focus because their situation is so overwhelming, it could be that our call
is to pray.

Maybe we can be present and supportive,
But if we can't we can pray.
Prayer is a powerful way of being in solidarity
with one another's suffering.

Tell your friend you are praying.
If a scripture you read speaks to their need, share it.

These are tangible ways of sharing the love and faithfulness of God.

I suspect that Jacob knew his family was praying.
Maybe he didn't get a card, or a scripture, but
Something gave him the strength to stay in the struggle.
All night long.
He knew, at a deep level, that God was with him.
He just didn't realize it was God he was wrestling!

And at daybreak, when the wrestling match was still raging,
As the frogs grew quiet, and the morning birds sang,
Jacob's opponent played the rascal.
The injury he inflicted on Jacob would have been illegal
according to the rules of wrestling.
He triumphed over Jacob by a tricky and painful move
And by fooling Jacob about his identity.
As the light returned, Jacob realized, this was not his brother.
This man who seemed his equal, his twin, until that superhuman move that dislocated his hip,
This was not Esau
If it wasn't him...then who?

In his agony, Jacob still would not let go.
Jacob had by now, reached some epiphany.
He had moved from fear and distress
to some sense that he could prevail,
He could hold out against this opponent.
He seems to have realized that the way to do that
was to make peace...to strive, not for a win,
but for a blessing.

Blessing is a linking verb.
It connects the thing blessed with the God who created it.
Or vice versa.
To be blessed is to be aligned

with the faithful purposes of God.
That's what Jacob wanted.
After all that was lost,
in the midst of all that the future held,
Jacob wanted his blessing.

The prophet Hosea talks about Jacob
this way in Hosea 12:2 – 6
The Lord will
punish Jacob according to his ways –
In the womb he tried to supplant his brother,
and in his manhood he strove with God
He strove with the angel and prevailed
He wept and sought his favor,
he met him at Bethel and there he spoke with him.
The lord, the God of hosts, the Lord is his name.
As for you, return to your God,
hold fast to love and justice,
And wait continually for your God.

Jacob held fast to love and justice, literally.
He clung and fought and struggled with God
All Night..
And as the sun rose, dark shapes became palm trees,
And river reflected sky,
Jacob he was changed.

He would never be the same.
His name had been changed,
he would always have a limp. Even from a distance, people would identify him.
He would never deceive anyone about who he was again.

But, for all that, he knew he was blessed.
And as he hobbled toward the future,

He discovered that his brother
Who was no longer his enemy, was eagerly approaching,
Scriptures says, Esau ran to meet Jacob
And embraced him, he threw his arms around his neck
And kissed him. And they wept.

Friends, are we believing for that daybreak?
Are we holding that hope on behalf of those we care about?
Daybreak is coming.
The dawn from on high is risen upon us.
Jesus said I am the light of the world.
In him, our darkness is resurrected into light.

When we walk together with someone who struggles,
Listening to their stories and sharing our own,
We see that the wounds we've received
Are healing, and even our scars cry hallelujah.

Our tests become testimonies.

There is nothing more faith building than
hearing those stories of God's presence in our struggles.

So let's be present to others in times of crisis.
And let's prayerful on their behalf.
Let's praise God together when the dawn rises
And shadows recede to reveal a new day.