

Psalm 20; (Genesis 32:22-32, background)
2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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“THE GOD OF JACOB...!”

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you! Psalm 20:1
“I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Genesis 32:26b

We all despise injustice, lying, cheating and stealing. So how does someone like the Old Testament Jacob not only get to be the third of the founding patriarchs of an almost four thousand year tradition, but have a whole race and nation of people named after him?

There are few more intriguing, if sinister, characters in all of Scripture than Jacob. Jacob, let's face it is about as slick as hot butter. He even emerged from the womb grasping the heel of his red faced, hairy twin brother Esau. His name, Ya-acov comes from the root word “heel.” It also plays on the word a'cav “cheat.” Esau became a hunter, the pride of his father, Isaac, while Jacob, whose name also means “supplanter,” as in one who ‘trips up’ another, was Rebekah's pride, a stay-at-home mama's boy whom she encourages to steal privilege and blessing from the hapless but explosive Esau. So Jacob steal's the birthright from the ravenous Esau with the enticement of a bowl of stew when Esau returns from a long hunt. Then he steal's their blind father's blessing from the firstborn Esau by wrapping goatskins around his arms and wearing Esau's reeking clothes. To escape his brother's wrath his mother packs him off to Uncle Laban in Iraq.

On the way, in a wilderness place in the dead of night, Jacob has a dream in which angel messengers ascend and descend from God on a ladder between earth and heaven. And in the dream God stands beside Jacob and promises him both the land that he is now fleeing, great progeny to populate the land, just as God had promised his grandfather, Abraham, and finally God promises abiding presence and protection. How very odd, how very disturbing, that one who had secured his fate to date (for good or ill) by such cunning, slyness and outright deceit, should find himself so blessed. But then, of course, it was but a dream, the mind in turmoil of a man in flight. It is a dream that must have lingered like a mockery because he will remain in exile twenty years, fourteen of them with a hint of its consummation. For in Haran (northern Iraq) he falls in love with his cousin,

Rachel, but meets his match in her father, his scheming uncle Laban, who makes him work seven years for Rachel's hand, only to substitute the veiled and sloe-eyed Leah on the wedding night. Then another seven years hard work with for the apple of his eye, the equally ageing Rachel. In a feat of mystifying animal husbandry, Jacob causes his own herds to prosper. But success also breeds deep resentment and Jacob is forced to flee with his family while Laban is distracted at shearing time.

This twenty year parenthesis, now with four wives and eleven children in tow, closes as it began, in the dead of night in a wilderness place far from home. By the River Jabbok that marks the margin of his homeland, fear again tears at his soul in dread of Esau—for Jacob knows how injury and passion have long memories—and he sinks to his old ways. No Lawrence of Arabia he, tearing into the fray like a spear point at the head of his followers. Instead he sends conciliatory messages to his wild brother. But the messenger returns with only this: “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” So the old conniving Jacob resurfaces and sends the women and children on ahead as a placating shield, in discreet units at intervals, his flocks and herds a sacrificial offering. Finally, more messages cloying with appeasement. Meanwhile Jacob, God's elect, cowers in the darkness on the safe side of the river.

Once again fear folds around him like a funeral pall in this wilderness place, and so he goes where most of us go when all else fails. He throws himself on the mercy of God in prayer, a God who has been conspicuous by his uninvited absence these twenty years. When last we heard Jacob pray, after awakening from the dream of the ladder, and crossing into foreign soil with nothing more than a staff in his hand, it was a conditional prayer, a prayer with all the introspective distance of a soliloquy. “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God” (Genesis 32:20). Now, this score of years later, Jacob has everything, hundreds among his flocks and animals, wives, children, wealth—yet it is as nothing. And now he pleads with God a broken man, with none of the arrogance of youth, with no conditions.

But still he is not yet ready to give up all. In a transition as swift as an edit splice Jacob finds himself wrestling with a strange adversary in the darkness. All through the night they scrap with each other like titans, neither gaining the upper hand; Jacob and this faceless stranger, a man, or is he an angel? Or is it God? Like the strangers at noon at old Abraham's tent who are identified severally as a “man,” an “angel,” and “God,” one cannot tell. With first ‘rosy-finger dawn’ clawing at the horizon and the possibility of the stranger's identity being revealed, being known, the adversary strikes Jacob on the thigh and dislocates his hip. Still Jacob, who has brawled with God and the implications of the covenant all his life,

will not release him until the adversary blesses him (only God can give the ultimate blessing—the fullness of life we yearn for).

It is a provocative image, the human and the divine wrapped in each other's sweat, so desperate to prevail, so tenacious of spirit, neither giving an inch, even in the pain of mutilation or discovery.

“Bless me,” howls Jacob, “and I will let you go.”

Silence.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Jacob,”—the *supplanter* says.

The stranger says, “No longer will you be Jacob, but *ish-ra-el*, Israel. “One who strives between man and God. “And there he blessed him.”

From that moment he was God's. He looks up and in the distance Esau is coming with a swarm of 400 men. And as Jacob bowed himself in penance seven times on the way to meet his brother, Esau ran headlong toward him, hurled himself around Jacob's neck, and kissed him, and they wept” (Genesis 33:4). Then wrapping each other in embrace they went their way, Jacob limping, as he would the rest of his life, a sign and a reminder to all that “all God's chil'en walk with a limp.”

The Jacob story powerfully tells us of a God who is willing to accept us, warts and all. A God who does not applaud our waywardness, yet is willing to look beyond it and wait for us to come around, even for decades. A God of infinite patience, yet a story that reminds us that we do not have infinite time.

Fourteen times throughout the Bible, the text speaks of “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Jacob who wrestled with God well into middle age. Abraham, the founding father, Isaac his son, and Jacob, the reluctant, scheming, intensely independent patriarch whom God never gave up on. Abraham, the founder of our faith. Isaac the good son of whom little is written, perhaps because he came to God without much resistance or fanfare. And Jacob, the holdout, the one who came the long way round to God.

Dread of the things of earth, and resistance of the claims of heaven, both meet in the lessons of Jacob's story. Put together with the Esau story, the two parallel each other. The two kinds of messenger, earthly and heavenly. Earthly ploys, and heaven's interventions. Two kinds of meeting, that is, two reunions. But the earthly reconciliation with Esau cannot happen without the heavenly blessing because Jacob has too much manipulative self that gets in the way. The wrestling is his last ditch assertive striving for independence. The blessing the last of his terms, and the only one acceptable to God. And the river, that he still must cross—the river is his baptism. Esau's stunning embrace is a sign of Jacob's redemption. And our embrace of God, a sign of our own.

Amen.