

Jacob at the Jabbok

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Texts: Genesis 32: 22-31

The same night “Heel-Grabber” (a.k.a. Jacob) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Heel-Grabber was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Heel-Grabber, he struck him on the hip socket, and Heel-Grabber’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Heel-Grabber said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Heel-Grabber.”

Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Heel-Grabber, but God-Fighter (a.k.a. Israel), for you have struggled with beings, divine and human, and have prevailed.”

Then Heel-Grabber asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.

So Heel-Grabber called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.”

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Sometimes you just have to struggle with God. Maybe this season of your life is one of those times. Maybe today is one of those times. Maybe today you are standing on the banks of the Jabbok, full of fear, confused, vulnerable. But then again, maybe that’s not you, or at least not you right now. So, maybe not today, but sometimes, you just have to struggle with God.

It was just such a sometime for Jacob. Do you know Jacob? Like so many of the people through whom God works in the Bible, he’s a problem. He’s called “Heel -Grabber” because he was a twin with his brother Esau, whose heel he was grabbing as they were born – Esau first, of course, then Jacob. In that culture, the order mattered. Esau came first – and thus was the heir, the heir of the family wealth, and the heir of the promises of God. Jacob was the spare, or was supposed to be. Jacob, however, managed to manipulate his brother, buying the rights of the first born with a bowl of soup when his brother was desperate. Then he positively deceived their father into blessing him with the blessing of the first born – and once done, it was impossible to undo.

After that, he ran, far from home. He ran to his grandfather’s homeland, settled there, married Rachel and Leah – became wealthy, and quite paranoid, and in his paranoia, decided to return home. He believed, however, that his brother Esau was at home waiting to kill him for stealing the birthright. As he began the journey, however, he sent ahead a boatload of gifts for his brother, trying to placate him...hundreds of sheep, and goats and treasures of all kinds. And, then, his two wives. (Which doesn’t seem right, as he thinks Esau wanted to kill him, and therefore might well kill those two wives.) And in

that moment, as he himself was about to cross the river, he slept one more night before meeting his fate with his brother.

And he struggled with God. Now the Bible doesn't go into the psychology of that struggle, but it is clearly, in the midst of this narrative, a struggle of identity. Who would Jacob be? It's a struggle about the direction of his life. What role would Jacob have in God's future. It was a struggle of healing, the healing most directly of a relationship, but a healing as well of a life of deception and self-promotion and acquisitiveness that Jacob had taken on for himself. It was a struggle for the healing of his life, his identity, his relationships, everything about him that made him who he was – it was a struggle with God in the moment, as he was about to cross the river and face his future.

And I would claim, although I don't know if Jacob saw it this way, that it was a holy struggle. Because a struggle of identity, a struggle of relationship, a struggle of the need for healing in so many ways, is a holy struggle.

In just a moment now, we are going to invite all of you to come forward to meet with our Deacons and/or our pastoral staff to have a time of healing. And what I want to present to you today is that this is not a magical time. This is not a time that you are going to receive a little oil, a prayer, and the laying on of hands, and then everything is going to be perfect in your life. Although as Kate points out, I don't want to limit the work of the Holy Spirit. If that healing happens to you in the moment, then thanks be to God! But this isn't like what you sometimes see from t.v. preachers at 2:00 a.m.: "Heal, heal, in the name of Jesus!" (hand on the forehead for a "healing" motion). It's not that kind of healing. Rather, that oil, that prayer, and those hands, are an acknowledgment that whatever struggle is going on in your life it is a holy struggle.

These healing rituals are to take your struggle within the life of this body of Christ, and bless it, and to pray that a blessing for you will come out of it. What you are going through at this moment, whether you recognize it or not, and Jacob certainly didn't - what you are going through at this moment is a holy struggle. And with the healing that we offer this day, we don't necessarily transform things on the spot. But we do show that your journey, your struggle, is part of this people, part of this common journey, part of this faith, and it is a holy struggle that we all share together.

You may not get a new name out of it, but I hope that you will be, like Jacob, become a new Israel, a new God-fighter. Not fighting against God, but fighting with God, for the healing that needs to come to your life. As you do so, as we all do so, may God bless us in that holy struggle this day.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.