

*The same night 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. Jacob was left alone . . . and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

One way to think about the Bible—and I think this is especially true of the Book of Genesis—is as something like an old photo album. *Here is grandpa just before he went off to the beaches of Normandy. Or this was taken when grandma arrived at Ellis Island and didn't speak a word of English.* Behind every old black and white snapshot there is a story.

It may seem counter-intuitive at first to think about the Bible this way because except for those children's Bibles, when you open a Bible all you see are lots and lots of words. But the words are used to paint pictures. (Maybe you could even say a thousand words are worth a picture.) When we can imagine those pictures in our mind's eye, then the stories can begin to come to life for us. And when the people in those "photos"—Abraham or Sarah or Moses or Miriam or Peter or Mary Magdalen—start to become real for us, then we can begin to see connections with our own faith journeys.

As a congregation our experience with the Bible is diverse. Some of us are hearing these stories for the first time. Others of us may have some vague memory from church school or Vacation Bible School. Or maybe we know Jacob and sons primarily through the stage, and the musical genius of Andrew Lloyd Weber. Some of us are in the practice of reading the Bible on a daily basis—and therefore come back to these texts again and again. If we aren't careful, though, we can get into a rut because we think we know the story already. But I think that here, too, the analogy works. Have you ever gone back to look at old wedding photos, for example, maybe even for the zillionth time—only to discover something you never saw before? Maybe it's the way that Uncle Charlie was smiling when he was best man at dad's wedding—a smile that looks so much like his nephew Billy. In a similar vein I think that these old familiar stories, especially from Genesis, are filled with endless possibilities and the potential for us to discover good news that draws us closer to the love of God as we glimpse something of ourselves there.

So Jacob crosses the ford at the Jabbok River. He's been away from home for twenty years. If he left in his late teens or early twenties, then we are probably in the ballpark to assume he is now around forty or so. You might even say this experience at the Jabbok is the ultimate mid-life crisis! At daybreak, Jacob has a new name: Abraham may be the father of faith, but Jacob *becomes* Israel. And he walks with a limp.

Recall the scenes we know about from Jacob's baby album. The photo, for example, taken at his birth—the second of two twins born to Isaac and Rebecca. The "heel-grabber" they called him jokingly, because the midwife said he came right on the heels of his brother, Esau, and it almost seemed like his was trying to hold his brother in the womb and get out first! Of course like so many photos taken in the birthing room or in those early years of life such stories take on meaning as life is lived. "That kid never seemed to cry," a mother tells her friend—"she was the best baby." And the story is told for one of two reasons: either that kid has continued along that path or somehow, out of nowhere she is out of control and the storyteller is trying to make sense of these changed circumstances. Or someone else says, "I knew this wasn't going to be easy

from the moment that boy came home from the hospital and kept us up all night for months on end...” So Jacob was a heel-grabber, born just a few minutes after his brother and apparently not happy at all about it from day one.

And then there is that photo of the heel-grabber all grown up—now tricking his father by serving up the stew at the old man’s deathbed with those animal skins taped on his own hands. Or the scene we explored last weekend of his wedding day—to his first wife, Leah—whom Uncle Laban tricked him into marrying before Rachel.

Over the course of twenty years, Jacob has been able to make a new life for himself in the land of his mother’s people. He is now surrounded by wives and children. His hard work has paid off and he is financially successful. Now he is heading home to face not only his own demons but his family and particularly his brother, Esau. This experience at the Jabbok takes place on the eve before their reunion.

Can you imagine two decades passing and brothers who shared the same womb not speaking for that entire length of time? As a pastor I am sad to tell you I can imagine it all too well, because I see it more than I wish to admit, and too often at funerals or weddings. Siblings or parents and their children who have fought over an inheritance (as Jacob and Esau did) or perhaps there was a divorce; or maybe no one even can remember how it started. It seems to me that after so much time has passed there is really never any way forward other than for someone to pick up the phone, or start out on a journey as Jacob did, or to be able to finally utter the two most difficult words in the entire English language: “I’m sorry.” We can spend our whole lives, or decades at least, waiting for someone else to pick up that phone if we aren’t careful.

So as Jacob is heading home—as he fords that river—he has a lot on his mind. He is not only coming to grips with his past but facing a very uncertain future. All he knows is that he has to try. He has to try to find his way back home. He has to try to make peace with his brother.

When we see him in this scene from the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis he is utterly alone—the wives and kids are all on the other side of the river. On top of that it’s nighttime, the bewitching hour; the time when his internal dragons threaten to undo him.

It is there that he wrestles until daybreak. I wonder if we did have a camera available what kind of photo we would take. Is the man he wrestles real or imagined? Is it God, or an angel in disguise, or a man of flesh and blood? Is this an internal or external struggle or some mixture of both? The text is ambiguous, but one thing is certain: Jacob is left at the end with a limp. And at least in Jacob’s own mind, he feels he has wrestled with God and lived to tell about it. He calls the place, Peniel: for he has seen God face to face and lived to tell about it.

Jacob himself gets a new name: Israel. So if we Christians are part of this story, part of the new Israel that has been grafted in to the old Israel, then this story is important to us. The story seems to be suggesting that the journey of faith is not about moral certitude or dogmatic clarity but about wrestling—an image I like very much. It’s also about that willingness to step forward into the unknown, even if we have to limp toward it. In fact, maybe faith itself is born when we recognize that we can’t go back, and that the only way forward is by grace.

Next weekend we'll turn our attention to the sons of Jacob—the original “cheaper by the dozen” gang. Our gaze will turn toward Joseph and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat. But before we get there, I want to remind you of one of the most beautiful snapshots in the Old Testament and perhaps in all of Scripture. I know that while I was still away the gospel appointed was the story of the prodigal son, and my friend Ted Harris showed a video of a ballet to help the congregation to visualize that extraordinary reunion between father and son. It is such a wonderful story and a powerful example of what it means for us as followers of Jesus Christ to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

But there is a very similar scene in the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Genesis as well—the very next chapter beyond where today's reading comes from. After his divine encounter at the Jabbok River, Jacob continues his journey toward home. And suddenly he looks up and he sees his brother, Esau, coming toward him, accompanied by four hundred men. And surely Jacob must be thinking, “this is it...my life is over...he has every right to kill me and that is what he is going to do after all these years.”

Only that isn't what happens. Amazingly, Esau runs out to embrace his brother. He gives Jacob/Israel a big bear hug and kisses him. And these two middle-aged men begin to cry tears of reconciling love. It is an amazing image and it always saddens me a little that the lectionary overlooks it because its omission helps to feed the mistaken biases so many people have about the Old Testament. It's truly an image of grace and healing no less powerful than the story of the prodigal son. Like that more familiar story it, too, insists that you can go home because the ties that bind family together are far more powerful the divisions and fears that threaten to tear us asunder.

Taken together, these two images—these two snapshots—bring us near to the end of this generation of the patriarchs. We'll see Jacob again as an old man who grieves when he is given the news that his favorite son, Joseph, is dead. That of course, will turn out to be a lie. But all of that in due time—by the time we get there the story-line will have shifted toward Joseph. In a real sense this is the last we see of Jacob—now known as Israel.

These two scenes from Genesis 32 and 33 remind us of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our faith. We are called into relationship with a God who is not warm and cuddly, but a wrestler who may leave us walking with a limp. But our encounters with God also leave us with a new sense of identity and purpose: for us as followers of God in the way of Jesus, that is as those sealed and marked and claimed as Christ's own forever. That claim on us leads us toward our true home, and opens us up to the horizontal relationships of life. It calls us into community where we are commanded to love our neighbor. Our ministries are about living into that reality by becoming ambassadors of reconciliation as we discover that in Jesus' worldview no one is excluded from the family of God: that our sisters and brothers and parents are not only those with whom we share blood ties but all of those who have come to the waters of baptism. And even beyond that to all who have been created in God's own image. Love of God and love of neighbor—two sides to one coin. And it's all there in Genesis 32 and 33.