

Text: Genesis 32: 22-32

I am indebted to Swiss pastor and theologian Lytta Basset in her book *Holy Anger* for many of the insights in this sermon (page numbers in parentheses). I begin with her translation of the text, showing the 3 *hapax*: words that are found nowhere else in Hebrew Scripture, which makes them both difficult to translate, and suggests they point to an experience that was so hard to describe they were perhaps created especially! (124) They are shown in italics below.

22 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.

23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

24 Jacob was left alone; and a man *is dusty* with him [or got him in a body-hold] until daybreak.

25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him [*or* as he held him in a body-hold].

26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

27 So he said to him, “What is your name [shem]?” And he said, “Jacob.”

28 Then the man said, “Your name [shem] shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have *striven with God and with humans [held on-been a prince, and have prevailed.*” (124)

29 Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name [shem].” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name [shem]?” And there he blessed him [sham].

30 So Jacob called the name [shem] of the place Peny'el, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my being/my life is preserved.”

31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el, limping because of his hip.

32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the *thigh muscle [the nerve] (naseh)* that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the *thigh muscle.* (99-100)

I prefaced the reading of the text with these words from Elie Wiesel: “A strange adventure, mysterious from beginning to end, breath-takingly beautiful, intense to the point of making one doubt one's senses. Who has not been fascinated by it? Philosophers, poets, rabbis and storytellers, all have yearned to shed light on the enigmatic event that took place that night, a few steps from the river Jabbok.” (from *Messengers of God*)

Many of us perhaps remember the basics of the story of Jacob from Sunday school, and maybe have not re-visited it since then. We can't talk about Jacob without recalling something of his family tree: his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, and his parents Isaac and Rachel.

We remember that his father, Isaac, the long awaited one, the one promised to Abraham and Sarah when they were old and barren, was then the one who survived the would-be-sacrifice on Mount Horeb. He grew up to marry Rebekah. Rebekah gave birth to twins: Esau was the hairy one who came out first, and Jacob came out second, gripping Esau's heel, so his name Jacob means "takes by the heel" or "he supplants."

Jacob and Esau were very different, and their parents chose their favorites: Isaac favored Esau the hunter for what Esau brings him: red meat, and Rebekah favored Jacob. Chapter 27 of Genesis describes the grand deceit that Rebekah engineers so that Jacob will get his father's blessing rather than Esau. She overhears her husband invite Esau to go hunting, make a stew and then receive his blessing. Rebekah prepares the stew herself, covers Jacob's smooth skin with animal skins, and sends Jacob in. Jacob obeys his mother; Isaac is deceived; Jacob receives the blessing, Esau arrives home astonished at what has been taken away from him, and Isaac "trembles violently" but does not confront either Rebekah or Jacob about this deceit. Esau hated Jacob for this, and planned to kill him. Rebekah counselled Jacob to flee to her brother Laban, but covers up this escape plan with another story. Jacob again obeys. On his journey to his uncle, he has the dream of "Jacob's ladder" in which he is promised blessing. He works 20 years for Laban, marrying both Leah and the woman who wins his heart at first sight: Rachel. During this time he thrives as a shepherd, and becomes wealthy, despite his uncle's repeated manipulations and deceits. Then one day he "sees" (Gen 31:2,5) the injustice, and realizes it is time to leave. At the same time, he hears the voice of God confirming what he desires: "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." (Gen 31:3) So Jacob sets out homeward, again by stealth, (another flight) with all his flocks, his 2 wives and concubines, and his 12 children. Laban chases him, and Chapter 31 we see Jacob become angry for the first time in his life. (42) This is his awakening: he actually has his first real honest confrontation: he stands up for himself, which leads to a non-aggression pact: Jacob will not cross over back into Laban's territory. He is now at the Jabbok.

He sends messengers before him to his brother Esau, and they come back saying that Esau is coming to meet him, with 400 men. At that point, Jacob becomes greatly afraid and

distressed. What does he do? He prays! (Gen 32:9-12). He tells God quite bluntly: “I am afraid” because “he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.” But he also remembers the promise “Yet you have said, I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea.” After this prayer, perhaps as fruit of this prayer, he comes up with a plan to deal with the one he imagines is enemy. He sends before him multiple droves of animals, with space between them (interesting! Why the spaces?) as gifts hoping that these gifts will appease Esau “When I see his face, perhaps he will accept me.” “When I see his face” is significant: Jacob is now willing to have a face-to-face encounter. (55) With the fear of what the next day will hold at the forefront of his mind, in a place where he feels he can go neither forward nor back, so he is in a place of complete vulnerability, Jacob lies down to sleep. That brings us to the passage that we heard today: a man comes to him and wrestled with him until daybreak. This man wrestles with him, and does not prevail, which says something about Jacob’s huge strength, resilience, persistence, tenacity, perhaps hunger. What is at stake in this match?

Jacob has been “under-the-thumb” of various others (his elders) all his life (37). He has been caught in the lies and distrust that his parents have woven around him. He has not been able to stand up for himself, to know himself as blessed. He deceived his father in response to his mother’s prompting, which led him to escape, not facing Esau. He was “under-the-thumb” of his uncle Laban for 20 years, earning his 2 wives. He has been “only capable of obeying the members of his family to *their* hearts’ content.”(138) When he finally musters the courage to get out of this abusive relationship with Laban, he is nevertheless still fearful (under the thumb of the past) of his older brother Esau. In the night of wrestling (which Basset interprets as a dream), the wrestler touches him on the thigh. The thigh represents deepest vulnerability, this wound about himself, about the lie, the loss of identity (134). His anger that he has not been blessed for who he really is revealed to him in this touch, and he accepts the touch, and then asks to be blessed. And he is blessed. He is given a new name, because his previous name “supplanter” was not the deepest truth about him. The sign of his newness is shown in his power to name the place. He is still in exile at this point; he is still homeless, but he has the power to name THIS place where he now is. He names it for what he has experienced here: he has “turned to God” and then in the next verse it becomes even stronger: he invites everyone to turn : “Penyel “turn towards God” becomes Penuel “turn yourselves towards God.” (127)

Although nothing has changed in the exterior circumstances, (he still needs to face Esau)

Jacob experiences a kind of healing release. He is set free from fear of what will happen now. He is now ready to meet Esau, free from the mindset of fear that can only see “dominate or be dominated.” (151)

What is this transformation? It is the transformation that comes from a true encounter with God. I am going to suggest that a true encounter with God both opens up our wounds, and also deeply affirms who we are, and blesses us. In a true encounter with God, we accept God’s desire for us to know we are chosen. Biblical scholar P Beauchamp: “More than anyone, Jacob wanted, with every fibre of his being, to be chosen. He had wanted this from the time he was in the womb. He worked unceasingly at it. If Esau had wanted it more, he would have returned earlier from hinting . . . To be chosen is to want to be chosen . . . God himself gives humans the desire that God wants to fulfill. For where did Jacob get this desire?” (Basset,140)

What if the blessing that Jacob asks of the wrestler, whom after-the-fact he calls God, is a blessing that God longs to give to all of us, each of us? What if our blessing comes in fulness as we allow ourselves to be touched at our most vulnerable place? What if God longs for each of us to know ourselves as chosen by the God who longs to bless the whole world through us? And what if any true experience of blessing inevitably turns us towards the whole world? Jacob is turned TOWARDS his brother Esau. Enemy becomes brother in a recognition that life does not have to be either -or zero-sum power game, dominate or be dominated. There is room for both of them.

This story of Jacob has the feel of a Pentecostal story: the shift from fear to bold confrontation; the shift from dependence to taking responsibility and risk; the shift that turns a disciple out towards the world, with a story to tell. This shift that involves forgiveness, just as Pentecost led to forgiveness of those who had killed Jesus.

This story feels far too grand and deep for 15 or 20 minutes on a hot Sunday morning on the long weekend in August, so I don’t know if we can go much further than to ask some pretty big questions:

What are our wounds, both as individuals and collectively as 2 downtown Presbyterian churches, which are deeply hidden from view?

What are the wounds that prevent us from turning to God and to one another?

What are the “scripts” we have been living by? Scripts that keep us bound and guilty and powerless? Scripts that keep us pre-Jabbok? pre-Pentecost.

What are the wounds that keep us turned in upon ourselves, fearful, rather than free to turn outward to a world longing to know itself as chosen too? Do we have a hunger for that kind of freedom?

What did Jacob discover about God in that wrestling, and what might we discover if we gave ourselves over to this kind of wrestling with God? What we hardly even know ourselves?

And what if we have arrived at a some kind of Jabbok: no way back, but the future looks pretty scary. And what if God is here, ready to engage us?

It is so poignant to hear this story of fear turned to reconciliation in the light of the violence in this very land today, between Israel and Gaza, but it would be unfair to see them as “them” and not “us” as well. We are always caught in the Gaza/Israel struggle until we experience the gracious blessing of God of all power, within whose countenance is endless spaciousness, who names us and sets us free.

May we know something of that spaciousness, and so be set free.

Offered to the congregations of MacNab St and St Paul’s Presbyterians congregations,
Hamilton, Ontario by Rev. Cathy Stewart