

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 10.16.22

### Genesis 32:22-31

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.<sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.<sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."<sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."<sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."<sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob's name means "to take by the heel." The name he would come to have, Israel, means something else, means "one who wrestles with God." But his first name, Jacob, means "to take by the heel."

It's a long story.

It goes like this.

Isaac and Rebekah were eager to have a child and were getting worried it would ever happen.

At last, Rebekah could sense she was pregnant. Twins. They "struggled within her." She inquired of the Lord about this. The Lord said: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

When it was time for the birth, the two came just moments apart. Esau was born first, red and hairy, so he was named Esau, which means "rough." Jacob came next, and was indeed grasping into his brother's heel.

So goes the story.

For this, he was named Jacob, which is sometimes translated "supplanter," but also sometimes "deceiver," "schemer," or "rival."

As the boys grew, Esau became a skilled hunter and a man of the fields, while Jacob was quiet, eventually to become a man "living in tents."

During Isaac, their father's, final days, time came for him to bestow his blessing on his first born. Old and blind now, Isaac called to Esau, and told him to go to the fields to hunt game for

something worthy of a savory stew to share with his father. Then, over a meal, Isaac would bless him, this almost last thing left to do in his life.

Esau went out.

But while he was out, Rebekah, who had been eavesdropping, called to Jacob. She had another plan. She favored Jacob, his more civilized ways. So, she had Jacob go to the flocks—not to the wilderness for hunting as humanity long had done, but to the flocks of animal husbandry as humanity would more and more now do.

To the flocks, then, to find two younglings that *she* might make a savory stew. Then Jacob was to disguise himself as Esau. He was to wear skins so his smooth arms and neck would feel hairy and to wear Esau's cloak so he'd smell not of the tent but of the fields.

Once disguised, Jacob went before his father with the savory stew. His father asked him, "Who are you, my son?" and this one who takes by the heel answered, "I am Esau, your first born." His father was skeptical and said to him, "Come near that I may feel you to know whether you are really my son Esau." So, Jacob went up, and Isaac felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's. Are you really my son Esau?" and, again, this deceiver answered, "I am Esau."

And so, Isaac blessed Jacob as if he were Esau. He said, "May God give you the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you."

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that Jacob really is a shiftless brother, really does deserve all the abuse he ended up taking that night in the desert when a stranger attacked him, wrestled him, and knocked his hip out of joint. "He deserved that and worse!" That's you're thinking.

But consider that Esau was something of a fool himself, was perhaps not at all worthy of the blessing his father had to give. Consider, please, the time of these twins' young adulthood. It involved another stew, this one also of Jacob's making, when his brother had come in from the field. Esau was famished from all his wilding, and he came in to see Jacob's cooking, and he said, "Give me some of the red stuff for I am famished!"

(That's how it's translated, "Give me some of that red stuff!" But what it indicates he said in the original Hebrew is more like this: "Give me some of that red red, for I am famished..." such a primitive request, just a few syllables up from grunting.)

Jacob took this as his chance to make a move. “Sell me your birthright,” he said to him, maybe stirring that most delicious-smelling red stuff (red *red*), which had Esau agreeing to do because, as he concluded, “I am about to die; what good is a birthright to me?”

It’s likely, of course, he wasn’t about to die, not any more than when, as a kid, you came in from playing and said to your mom, “I’m starving! Can I have a snack?” It’s troubling, though, because Esau wasn’t a kid, not anymore, and because he couldn’t separate his own immediate hunger from the greater importance of his birthright. Esau, it was beginning to seem, would always be stuck in an immature, reactive mode.

But humanity was on the verge of something new at this point, at this point in human history when this story came in to telling. It was on the verge of something more strategic, more civilized, which it’s likely the earliest hearers of this story would have sensed. We are at the dawn of known civilization with this mythic story of warring brothers, and story-tellers as story-hearers would likely have been on the side of civilization.

Progress, and all.

This means they’d have had little sympathy for Esau, little sympathy for someone living hand-to-mouth at a time when farming and animal husbandry were making survival more about planning and caretaking and delaying gratification. Hairy and smelly, Esau was practically an animal himself, and at a time when being human was more and more to be prized. Humanity was on the move from wilderness and fields to flocks and farm, all to the market and the city; and the likes of Esau were being left behind. rightly being left behind.

This was right. This was good. This was necessary. This is progress.

Even so, how sad it is when, according to the story, Esau came home. It’s never entirely happy-making when something’s deemed irrelevant—because it wasn’t always so. What’s eventually irrelevant once was crucial. We’re right to grieve that.

Isaac had just blessed Jacob. But he thought he’d blessed Esau, a mistake that only became clear when Esau came in and cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, “Bless me, me also, father!” and his father said, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.” So, Esau again: “But is he not rightly named *Jacob*? And have you not reserved a blessing for me? Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!” And then he lifted up his voice and wept.

Jacob would flee, would run from his brother’s understandable wrath. He would settle in faraway Haran, in the household of Laban, whose second-born daughter, Rachel, Jacob longed to

marry. He'd seen her and fallen in love with her at the village well. Laban agreed to let Jacob marry his daughter, but only after he worked for him for seven years. Yet, when he had done this, Laban gave over his first-born, instead: Leah, treating Jacob with a taste of his own medicine, as it were. Under the cover of darkness, Jacob had taken Leah to be Rachel; and by morning there was no going back. So, Jacob worked another seven years, this time winning Rachel.

More years passed. Laban and Jacob continued in their rivalry, their mutual trickery. Laban had agreed to give Jacob any younglings of his flock that had odd markings. He pretended this as unvarnished generosity. But blemished sheep were less valuable than unblemished. Laban also figured there wouldn't be that many. But Jacob used his knowledge of animal husbandry to breed for blemishes—so his flock grew while Laban's dwindled, and Laban's sons grew angry.

So, now: having fallen further out of favor with Laban, Jacob realized he would need once again to flee. He packed up his wives and his flocks and his household goods, and headed west to the land of his forefathers, and more to the point the land of his brother.

It was here where we catch up with him this morning— between a rock and a hard place, as it were, where some stranger now found him who now had nowhere left to flee.

Anxious that Esau might come out to the ford of the Jabbok in the middle of the night to find him and his caravan, anxious that Laban might break the covenant by which the two had parted company and come into the land of Canaan to have his revenge, Jacob sent his two wives and two maids and eleven children across the ford to spend the night away from him—him, who was a target, away from him that they might be safe.

And perhaps reeling from these many years of rivalry—first with his brother, then with his uncle, then with his cousins; perhaps in turmoil from these many years of familial tumult—his father's disfavor, his mother's favor, his brother's hatred, his uncle's deception, the jealousy that had arisen between his wives (they themselves a pair of sisters), the jealousy that had arisen between himself and his wives' brothers; perhaps exhausted by the complicated web that his life had become, (he was once, let's remember, a quiet man, living in tents) he now found himself in the wilderness in the middle of the night all alone.

It was perhaps the one thing worse than where he'd been and where he was going.

And suddenly this stranger was upon him. Without warning, without the sound of approaching footsteps, without the glimmer of an approaching lamp, without a word spoken ("Who goes there?"), a man suddenly appeared as if come from on high. And he wrestled with him, indeed until daybreak.

They were both, it would seem, of considerable strength and stamina, given that, after what might have been an hour or more, neither prevailed against the other, not even when Jacob's hip was put out of joint to such a degree that he would limp for the rest of his life, not even when daybreak was coming which was some sort of deadline for this stranger seeking not to be identified, not even when he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." So, Jacob, ever looking for some advantage, offered the stranger a deal: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The stranger's response to this demand for a blessing was this: "Tell me your name." And it seems a strange one, a non sequitur. What does this have to do with anything?

Expect that he'd been asked this before. Jacob had been asked this same question: "What's your name? Who are you?" Remember? His father, aging and nearing death, had asked Jacob then what this stranger asked now, "What is your name? Who are you?"

His answer then, as a young man whose relationships were all rivalries: "I am Esau." "What is your name?" "I am Esau." "You sound like Jacob." "I am Esau."

A much older man now, and likely a tired man from years of fleeing and hours of fighting, and a crippled man for having had his hip put out of joint, indeed a man all alone perhaps wrestling his own shadow, he now admitted what his brother had long ago insisted ("Is he not rightly named *Jacob*?")—this, which is a confession, really: "I am Jacob. I am one who takes by the heel."

There's something to be said for realizing who you are.

There's something to be said for recognizing yourself truly, for all the good and bad of it.

Just admit it. Just let it in. Confession, they say, is good for the soul. The truth, they say, will set you free.

That's not to say it won't also be painful to admit, painful to see. The truth of any one of us is never all sunshine and buttercups. But there it is, rock bottom, in the language of recovery. Now you can start clean. Now you can start over.

"I am Jacob," in which was the blessing, for now the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

The end.

And yet,

there was still the matter with his brother.

For it's one thing to have forgiveness from on high. It's another thing to have forgiveness in the world, from the one (or ones) whom you actually wronged.

“Now Jacob looked up and saw his brother coming...”—Esau with 400 of his men.

So, Jacob sorted out his wives and maidens and children, and then went ahead of them, out front to where he'd at last bow himself to the ground while Esau approached.

He could beg. He could grovel. “But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him,” the story tells us, “and they wept.”

And when Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” and Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally, Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

And Esau, understanding these all as a sort of offering, asked his brother, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?”

Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.”

But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” Which I think might be one of the best things found in the Bible, one of those moments of redemption that make all the troubling stuff worth it.

“I have enough. Keep what you have for yourself.” Is there a sentiment in the world more wonderful than that? Sufficiency. Gratitude. Appreciation. It's utterly freeing.

This is an old story. But it always surprises for its seeming like a quite modern story, not to mention a relevant story. Is there anyone here who hasn't been affected by a rivalry that warps everything around it? Is there anyone here who hasn't worried about being left behind, or felt the need to devise or manipulate or even deceive to “get ahead?”

And as for the machinations that make up history, the ambiguous process of civilizational building up and breaking down: of this what can we say? Really, who can say which is better, the highly civilized or the rougher hand-to-mouth? When it comes to so-called “progress,” can we really either absolutely embrace it without any grieving, or conversely utterly condemn it for its being too cruel to the one or ones left behind? “To everything there is a season,” is all I can say about it, “and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

Meanwhile, God is with us. Through it all, the warp and weft, the time and tide, God is with us. When we're trying to outrun and when we're finally caught up, when we're foolishly seeing to our own desires and when we grow up and get serious, God is with us.

That's the blessing.

Thanks be to God.