

Sermon for Proper 13, Year A: Genesis 32:22-31 – July 31, 2011
St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida
Preacher: The Rev. Jennie Lou D. Reid+

*Yield to me now, for I am weak but confident in self-despair;
speak to my heart, in blessings speak, be conquered by my instant prayer.¹ Amen.*

The leaders of our Diocese, especially those involved in the Nehemiah process for the renewal of churches, have encouraged all of us to develop a personal ministry plan. For me this is a concrete assignment; for you personally it is an invitation. I first heard about this requirement two and a half years ago, and finally this summer I have begun to give this project some serious consideration. Truly it is difficult to tackle this kind of deep reflection in the midst of designing liturgies, preparing sermons, teaching classes, responding to those in crisis, reflecting on finances, proofreading, imagining possibilities, nailing down calendar dates, and (of course) more. On the other hand, truly I do not want to do this. For one thing, I like to keep my options open, and a “plan” feels like prison. And for another, the task involves looking at God-given gifts and God-spoken call, which are at once mysterious and ever evolving. How can any mere mortal manage such a task? But do it I must. And when I finish, you are going to have to wrestle with me over the development of a Parish Ministry Play. We’re all in this together! Misery loves company.

In today’s Old Testament lesson we see Jacob alone pondering his past and imagining his future. He is camping out alone at the Jabbok, a fork in the river Jordan about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea. This event represents a fork in his life. Will his brother Esau act on his vow to kill Jacob, or will these twins be reconciled by the grace of God? Do you remember Jacob’s story?

Abraham’s son Isaac is sixty years old when he became a father. His wife Rebekah has an uncomfortable pregnancy with their twin sons, who seem to struggle mightily in her womb, right on through the birth canal! Esau pops out first with his brother Jacob’s hand gripping his heel. I wonder what the midwife is thinking! Esau grows up to be a manly outdoorsman, strong, burly, and impulsive: his father’s favorite. Meanwhile Jacob the indoor boy grows up to be a gourmet chef, pensive and clever: his Mama’s boy.

One day Esau comes in from the hunt famished. He sees Jacob stirring a pot of savory lentil stew, and he cannot wait to dive into a bowl of it. “Gimme some of that red stuff,” Esau bellows, with the swagger of a robust outdoorsman. “Give me your birthright in exchange, and I’ll present you a bowlful on a silver platter,” Jacob replies. Esau thinks Jacob drives a hard bargain, but he agrees to the terms. Thus the weakling little brother shows his strength of foresight. He looks forward to a future as the head of the family.

But next Jacob needs actually to receive his father’s blessing that will transfer this authority to him. Since it is no secret that Isaac prefers Esau to Jacob, Jacob needs to trick his father into giving him the blessing that he had lured Esau into handing over to him. Rebekah hears her husband Isaac ask Esau to fetch some wild game and prepare a feast for his dear old dad, who will bestow on him the family blessing as a reward for his trouble. Rebekah cooks up a plan that will bring this blessing to her favorite son. She prepares a savory stew of choice baby lamb and bakes fresh bread. Then she covers the smooth skin on Jacob’s neck and hands with the lamb’s fur and dresses Jacob in one of Esau’s outfits. Then with a silent prayer on her lips, Rebekah sends Jacob in to present the meal to his father, who is weak and nearly blind because of his greatly advanced age.

Isaac is no pushover. He questions the boy regarding his ability to bring in the game and cook it in record time. He reaches out to touch his son's skin, to feel whether this is the guy with hair on his chest. Though still skeptical, Isaac sighs and gives Jacob the blessing of the first-born son:

May God give you of the dew of heaven,
 and of 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!ⁱⁱ

The deed is done.

Esau returns from the hunt, prepares his feast, and presents it to his father. They are heartbroken when they realize the deception, but the blessing cannot be changed. Esau vows to himself that after his father dies, he will kill his brother. Rebekah hears Esau's muttering and directs Jacob to pack his bags. She suggests to Isaac that he send Jacob to her family in Paddanaram to find a wife, just as Isaac's father Abraham had sent him, in order to choose from among her brother's daughters (instead of staying here and ending up with a pagan Canaanite wife). Isaac sends Jacob away as Rebekah suggests. Thus Jacob escapes the immediate wrath of Esau.

Jacob thrives in Paddanaram but eventually God, who spoke to him in the dream of that ladder to heaven the night Jacob left home, returns in another dream and directs him to return to the place of his birth. He shares this dream with his wives Leah and Rachel, and they readily agree to the move. Therefore Jacob sets out, wondering whether he can indeed go home again. With him are his two wives, his two concubines, his eleven children, and his considerable livestock, the result of his miraculous God-graced success at animal husbandry. Because he does not know what kind of welcome he will receive from Esau, Jacob sends his company ahead of himself in two groups, hoping to gain Esau's favor by making this wealth a gift to Esau.

Therefore, on this night Jacob is alone under the vast wilderness sky beside a tricking tributary feeling very vulnerable. Darkness has descended on him. His history haunts him. His future seems fuzzy. Who is he? Where is he going? He is lost in the "now."

When have you felt the threads of your life unraveling? You sit outside the principal's office and wonder what your penance is going to require. You receive a medical diagnosis that changes your day-to-day routine and offers no guarantees. You take early retirement (voluntarily or otherwise) but feel financially insecure. You are looking for work and fear you cannot keep paying the rent or the mortgage. Your beloved spouse or sibling or parent or best friend dies. You feel the sting of betrayal – a challenge to your ability to trust anyone or to value yourself. Twin towers collapse. The economy totters on the brink. And we watch in horror.

At times like these, people of faith wrestle with God. We hope as we sing "God will take care of you" and "Great is thy faithfulness," But we wonder whether God really cares. We hear the news of children shot in a community park or abused by foster parents, and we ask God, "How can

you allow such misery to happen?” We try to process unwelcome personal news and cry, “Why me or my beloved one?” or “Why do bad things happen to good people?” We may feel guilty for lashing out against the Holy One, but Jacob’s story suggests that God welcomes this engagement. In struggle we grow strong.

My daughter Maggie is really skilled in childcare. She takes care of preschoolers for a living and over time has developed her own theories of what strategies help children to grow up healthy and happy. One of her theories is that children need to learn how to soothe themselves when they are feeling stressed and to quiet themselves to fall asleep. She told me recently about a family whose child at the age of one and a half could not turn herself over or crawl or walk. The parents took her to a specialist who realized that the baby had no muscle mass whatsoever. By observing the parents and asking questions, the doctor determined that the parents never allowed their baby to cry. Whenever the baby seemed to be on the verge of uncomfortable or upset, the parents would pick her up and fix the problem. The doctor explained, “You need to let this baby cry. Crying causes the child to fling its arms and fill its lungs. Crying causes the baby to move about. In this way the child’s muscles will become strong and the girl will be able to crawl and to walk and to develop in all the normal ways.” Stress in our adult lives helps us to focus on whatever we truly value and to grow stronger spiritually.

In his moment of crisis, Jacob resorts to prayer. Jacob cries out to the LORD: “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant... Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother...”ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob speaks out not from a perspective of entitlement but from a place of hope-filled humility. Jacob is ready to engage with God. Then God shows up, in the form of a human being, and wrestles with Jacob throughout the night. When morning comes, God must hurry away because it is life-threatening for any mortal to behold God in the fullness of God’s glory. But Jacob has the upper hand in this wrestling match and will not let his challenger leave before giving him a blessing. Thus the weaker twin who loses the race from the womb to the world, who spends his boyhood indoors pursuing domestic tasks, and who navigates the challenges of his life by relying on his wits, becomes a powerful man. This day, across the ford of the Jabbok, Jacob receives a new name that is the root of a new and uplifting identity. He will no longer be known as *Jacob* – the one who grasps by the heel, the one who supplants, the one who deceives – but as *Israel* – a name the narrator claims to mean “*the one who strives with God.*” However, *Israel* means more precisely “*God strives.*” The name, therefore, is an affirmation that God will continue to be tangled up in Jacob’s life, with its inevitable waves of delight and stress.

Jacob hobbles away from his overnight encounter. The experience has changed him permanently. We, too, are marked by the mighty struggles of our lives, like accepting widowhood or caring for a frail child or developing a Personal Ministry Plan. When we have wrestled with God, we tend to embrace the truth more fully. We accept ourselves and believe that God will stay tangled up in our lives as we struggle to grow up. We come to appreciate daily graces, like friends and kindness and the ability to help others in some way. As we ask God the hard questions and hang on to hear the answers, we receive the blessing of God’s encouragement and new vision for our lives. Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 638, from verse 3

ⁱⁱ Genesis 27:28-29

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 32:10-11