

GOD’S STORY, OUR STORY

A Blessing and a Limp

Genesis 32:9-13, 22-30

PENTECOST 15

September 22, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

The Bible is God’s story. It is also our story. Today we hear the story about a man who wrestles with God and limps away as a changed person. We heard the beginning of God’s story a couple of weeks ago, when God created a man and then a woman, and placed them in a garden called Eden. The couple disobeyed God’s command, and were expelled when sin entered the story. To quote the famous Puritan poet, John Milton, “**Paradise (was) Lost.**”

But as we read last week, when we gathered in the Social Hall for casual worship, God stays in the story. God calls a middle-aged couple, Abram and Sarai, and sends them on a faith journey with three promises:

they will have land and descendants

that will become a great nation

that will be a blessing for others.

We heard about the three visitors who were treated with lavish hospitality by Abram, and how Sarai laughed to herself when she overheard one of the strangers predicting that, despite her advanced age, she would bear a son “*in due season.*” True to the promise, Sarai gives birth to a son, Isaac, whose name in Hebrew means ‘*laughter.*’

Before getting to our assigned Narrative Lectionary reading for this 15th Sunday after Pentecost, it would be good to reacquaint ourselves with the ‘back story’ of Jacob and Esau.

Isaac, being the only son of Abraham and Sarah, and the carrier of God's blessing, reaches manhood and marries Rebekah. Like Sarah, Rebekah turns out to be barren. Unlike Abraham, Isaac's prayers for a child are answered. God blesses Rebekah with not one child, but with fraternal twin boys. The first is born red and hairy, so he is named Esau, which means '*hairy*.' The second tumbles out holding on to his brother's heel, so they name him Jacob, which means '*heel grabber*.' Jacob's name has another meaning as well, '*he deceives*.' While it is doubtful that this meaning was intended by his parents, as the story continues, we will see that it aptly fits Jacob's character.

It could be said that deep-seated family hostilities characterized Jacob's life. Because Isaac and Rebekah played favorites, Jacob and Esau grew up hating each other. Isaac also swindled Esau of his family's birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Later, Jacob and his mother lied and connived to swindle the family blessing from the blind Isaac. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle, Laban, in Haran, the very place from which his grandfather, Abraham, had departed. Jacob married his cousins Leah and Rachel, and, eventually, fathered thirteen children.

Sick and tired of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob concocted a plan to escape from Laban. After twenty years of living as a fugitive, Jacob decided it was time to come home. He'd be returning home a rich man with a large family. But, there was one obstacle facing him — Esau, his long-lost and embittered brother, who had threatened to kill him.

When Jacob's tribe arrived at the Jabbok River, Jacob sent his caravan and family across the river, while he remained behind to keep the darkness company for what might be the last night of his life. Come tomorrow, Esau may strike him dead on the spot. Of course, as the story has it, it is in a very real sense the last night of Jacob's life, but not because of Esau. Someone else would get to Jacob first.

As we have already experienced by our readings from Genesis, the Hebrews were master story tellers. And like any good story teller, they didn't reveal all. Instead, we are invited to enter the story and to fill in the gaps with our own imaginations and life experiences. We're invited to wonder what it was like for Jacob to wrestle so intimately with God — a wrestling match that lasted all night.

This morning, I want to encourage you and to help you use your imagination and enter into the story by sharing with you one of my favorite story tellers — a writer who has the knack for filling in the gaps. His name is Frederick Buechner (pronounced *Beek-ner*). What I am about to share with you comes from his book titled **Son of Laughter, the story of Jacob**. Believe it or not, I first heard it from the lips of Buechner himself, who read it from the pages of his yet to be published manuscript from the pulpit of the Manchester Baptist Church, across the street from the Northend Bookstore. I would later have the pleasure of meeting the author and having him sign one of his books that I was reading during a family vacation in Vermont.

What happened that night by the river? If Jacob were here to speak for himself, perhaps he would tell the story something like this:

Our bodies were slippery with mud.

We were panting like beasts.

We could not see each other.

We spoke no words.

I did not know why we were fighting.

It was like fighting in a dream.

He outweighed me and he out-wrestled me, but he did not overpower me.

He did not overpower me until the moment came to overpower me.

When the moment came, I knew that he could have made it come whenever he wanted.

Then he crippled me.

I could do nothing but cling now.

*I clung for dear life.
I clung for dear death . . .*

*“Let me go,” he said, “for the day is breaking.”
The words were more breath than sound.
They scalded my neck where his mouth was touching it.
I would not let him go for fear that the day would take him as the night had
given him . . .
“Bless me,” I said.
“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”
Even if his blessing met death, I wanted it more than life.*

*He said, “Who are you?”
There was mud in my eyes, my ears and nostrils, my hair.
My name tasted of mud when I spoke it.
“Jacob,” I said.
“My name is Jacob.”
“It is Jacob no longer,” he said.
“Now you are Israel.
You have wrestled with God and with men.
You have prevailed.
That is the meaning of the name Israel.”*

*The sun’s rim was just starting to show over the top of the gorge by the time
I finally crossed the Jabbok.
I staggered through the rocky shallows, one hip dipping deep with each new
step, and my head bobbing.
It’s the way I have walked ever since.
From that day to this, I have moved though the world like a cripple . . .
When he gave me his blessing and crippled me.”*

A blessing and a limp. In these nine verses in Genesis, we are given a picture of God that is very different than most of us are used to, a picture that sounds almost frightening. What are we to make of a picture of God who comes at Jacob like an adversary in the middle of the night? Jacob liked having God's presence and blessing on HIS terms. So long as God fit into his agenda, took care of him in the ways he wanted to be taken care of, then he would claim God as his own.

So, what do we make of this story? How is this story of God our story? I want to suggest to you that this is really a story about grace. How so? Granted, it is not the grace that we tend to envision, that sweet amazing grace that nudges us along "softly and tenderly." We like THAT kind of grace. It's unobtrusive, and not too demanding. It's the kind of grace that makes us feel safe and comfortable.

But the grace that grabbed hold of Jacob is a fierce, rough, and tumbling kind of grace. It is a grace that pursues us and wrestles us to the ground, locking us in its wounding hold. What am I talking about here? I'm talking about a grace that comes disguised in the form of unwelcome intrusions in our lives — disruptions, struggles, and disappointments, things that blind-side us and knock us flat on our backs, fighting for life. This is a grace that hurts and leaves us limping. But it also leaves us blessed, changed. And that makes it amazing grace nonetheless.

I am not suggesting that God is behind every experience of pain and struggle in our lives. That would be oversimplifying things and trivializing the real pain of those suffering. And sometimes, the struggle is the result of poor choices. What I am suggesting is that God is in every experience of struggle. God is present with us, holding and embracing us, even when we are unaware of it. We can limp away with the assurance that, by God's grace, even in this experience, as dark as it may seem at the time, it can be used for God's glory and purpose.

Beloved people of God,

And so, in this wonderful story about Jacob, whose name means *'heel grabber,'* he is grasped by a grace of a God, who had something in store for him that was far more than he could have ever imagined. When Jacob finally came face to face with his brother, Esau, he was a changed man, with a new name and a new limp to prove it. He was now Israel, ***“he who strives with God and with humans and prevails.”*** But this is prevailing that only comes with surrender and obedience. As we continue to wrestle with a God, whose presence in our midst is much too close for comfort, let us cling to God for dear life and for dear death. And let us cry out these beautiful words of surrender, spoken by Jesus from the cross: ***“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”***

AMEN