

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Pentecost 8, Proper 18A - Aug 3, 2014  
Genesis 32:22-31

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

You may have noticed over the past several weeks that we have been hitting some highlights of the story of our ancient patriarchs in Genesis this summer... Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have been the main characters with Joseph coming on to the scene next week. Today's story starring Jacob is one of the best and it marks a critical moment, arguably THE turning point, in Jacob's relationship with God. Since, like me, you might not instantly recall exactly what brought Jacob to this critical point, let's take a few minutes to consider the story of Jacob...

Jacob has been a scoundrel of the first degree right from the beginning of his life. He was born second, holding on to the heel of his twin brother Esau. This means that Esau is the eldest, with all the rights and privileges that come with being the first born. Jacob, on the other hand, was a swindler. One day when Esau comes home famished from a day of hard labour, Jacob makes him a deal to trade his birthright for stew and bread. Esau agrees and Jacob effectively steals the birthright away. Later Jacob tricks their father Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau and so steals from his brother once again. And this time Esau holds a grudge, so the story goes, and plans to kill Jacob.

So Jacob runs. He doesn't defend his despicable actions. He doesn't admit his wrongdoing or even try to make peace. Nope... he just runs.

One night as he journeys away, Jacob has a dream in which the Lord God makes him a stunning promise – a promise of land and of numerous offspring and of blessing. When Jacob awakens, he acknowledges the awesomeness of what has happened... but his commitment to God seems a little self-serving when he makes his vow: “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God...” (28:20-21) Jacob is faithful, I guess, but it's the luke-warm faith of one out to get whatever they can, however they can. It's about what God can do for Jacob, and has little to nothing to do with what Jacob might do for God. This speaks well of God I suppose, but makes me question God's judgement in choice of key patriarchs in the transformation and redemption of the world! But I digress...

Jacob makes the journey to his uncle Laban's land, and over the course of many years, marries 2 of his daughters and manages to get rich. But Jacob's wealth becomes a problem and Laban becomes angry and mis-trustful of him. True to form, Jacob runs – again – this time with all his possessions. But this second major journey is different from the first. This is a journey home, and Jacob must soon face Esau – the brother he swindled.

And Jacob is scared.

He sends messengers ahead of the caravan and they return saying only that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Which sounds like a rather strong army coming to fight – to kill – to destroy – and Jacob is even more scared.

In his great fear and distress, Jacob prays: “I am unworthy of all the kindness & faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’” (32:9-12)

Jacob’s faithfulness to the Lord our God has grown, it seems, and the prayer is the most humble and honest Jacob has been. The prayer is a good start, even if it does still end with him reminding God of the promises God had made. Maybe we can chalk it up to old habits dying hard. And maybe the trickery, the lying and the running is coming to an end – one step at a time, as Jacob grows and matures beyond using the people around him, even using God, for his own purposes.

After praying, Jacob sends servants again on ahead with extravagant gifts of herds, in several stages, in the hopes of appeasing his brother. He sends all the remaining people and possessions with him across the river by which they are camped. And he is left – alone – as night falls.

Alone at the riverside, in the dark of night, Jacob finally comes face to face with the lies and cheating and running away of his past. He comes face to face with the uncertainty of his present and with the fear of his future. He comes face to face with God – and God is not in a gentle mood.

Jacob has a restless night, to say the least! Some have called it “the dark night of the soul.” It is the monsters beneath the bed or in the closet that cause children to cry to their parents in fear. It is the tossing and turning and pillow flipping of a sleepless night.

A man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak approaches and even with a serious hip injury, still Jacob does not give up or give in. Even when this mysterious stranger wants the wrestling match to end and asks: “Let me go, of the day is breaking,” still, Jacob holds on: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

This blessing that Jacob desires is not stolen or swindled. It is not being sought through deception or trickery. And tonight, maybe for the first time, Jacob is not running away. Tonight – Jacob stays put, fights hard and relentlessly holds on: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

At long last – Jacob wants the blessing for himself, honestly. When asked by the strange nighttime wrestler: “What is your name?” He responds simply with “Jacob.” No ancestors, no pedigree, no clan, no promises of God. Tonight, he is just Jacob, and he will not let go until he gets a hard-fought, honest blessing – meant only for him.

On this night, Jacob the scoundrel becomes Israel – the people of the Lord God. Jacob becomes all those who continue to struggle with God, with the people around them and with their own humanity – and who overcome. With Jacob, we are the ones who struggle for blessing even though it has always been ours through the amazing grace, mercy and generosity of God. And with Jacob, when we hold on in our struggle, we are the ones who see God face to face, in the gentle morning rays, and live... despite all the odds.

From time to time, I hear questions of whether or not the bible is true – whether or not such stories really happened or if they are just fairy tales. Did Jacob \*really\* wrestle with God or an angel of God or who was that man? It is something we might wonder about during the day, but in the dark of night, when we are alone with a strange wrestler and a sore hip, we know the story is true. We know our wrestling partner is real and that if we just hold on, we can trust that the blessing that has always been there, will be spoken once more. No matter how bad we've been, no matter who we've cheated or how much we have deceived. No matter how often we're run away, we too can receive a blessing, meet God face to face and live.

In the end, the story reminds us that no matter how dark the night or how intense the struggle, the sun still rises in the morning, and life goes on. Jacob's life and journey continued on but he walked away from his nighttime encounter a changed man. Jacob walked on but he walked with a limp that I hope served to remind him of what it took, his own stick-to-it-iveness, to get the blessing he wanted.

There's a song done in a church in Seattle that talks about this story, and concludes with the reflection: "That moment, Jacob saw something not yet meant for human eyes. Grappled with humanity and hope... looked into the face of redemption and walked away blessed and broken..." (COTA, "I will not let you go") "Blessed and broken..." This is what it is to be relationship with God - each of us individually and together as the family of God. If anyone can teach us that God wants us and loves us as the blessed and broken people we are, it's Jacob. Perfection isn't what God requires of us... it is instead the desire to hang on even when it's hard, even when we're broken, and hold out to hear God speak words of blessing once more. Maybe if we listen closely today, this morning, we too will hear it and with Jacob, walk away blessed and broken.