

October 16, 2022 – Genesis 32:22-30

How in the world did Jacob get himself into this mess? How did Jacob always get himself in these messes? He wasn't a violent man. That was his brother Esau. Nor was he foolish. By all accounts, he was quite bright.

So how was it that this intelligent, peaceful man could find himself chased by armed men 3 different times in his life. That was probably how Jacob looked at the situation as he sat on the riverbank, watching his wives and children escape the wrath of his seemingly vengeful twin brother.

A more objective observer might ask, "How did Jacob not get himself into more messes?" For as peaceful and intelligent as Jacob was, he was by no means innocent. The man was... well... slimy. A con artist. A thief. A criminal. He was everything that his name implied.

You see, the name "Jacob" is Hebrew for "one who grabs your heel." His mother thought it was an appropriate name after he was born literally holding onto his twin brother's foot. But it was also a euphemism for something else. For a person who will grab your heel as you're walking by. Someone who intentionally trips you up. Someone you can't trust. A more modern expression of it might be "one who stabs you in the back."

And that is exactly what Jacob had done, time and time again. He exploited the weakness of his brother. He manipulated the blindness of his father. He preyed upon the stupidity of his father-in-law. And when he got caught – as he always did – he either talked his way out of trouble, or ran like a scared bunny. And yet, this backstabber was supposedly a patriarch of God's people.

I can imagine Jacob sitting silently in the darkness of the night. This was his first night alone in almost two weeks. His first night away from the rabble of no less than 15 irritated women and children. They were traveling back to his hometown for the first time, initially running from his angry father-in-law and now running from his angry brother. His family looked to him for answers. But for the first time in his life, he didn't have any answers. There was no way he was weaseling his way out of this one.

Jacob was startled as he heard a man approach him. No good comes of strangers sneaking up on you in the night, he knew. Peering into the darkness, he tried to see his face. And suddenly, before he knew quite what was happening, he was wrestling with this stranger who hadn't even offered his name. Perhaps the man was a thief or a murderer or just insane. Jacob didn't know for sure. He just knew he was in a fight for his life.

The man was strong, but so was Jacob. For while he may have been cunning and generally avoided a physical confrontation if he could, Jacob was also a weathered rancher. For hours they wrestled in the dirt, evenly matched. Jacob didn't know who this man was, but he was going to beat him. He was going to conquer this man like he had conquered every obstacle in his life: by strength, cunning, and willpower.

The horizon brightened as dawn approached, and Jacob strained in the faint light to see the face of the man he battled. A pair of intense eyes locked with his own and suddenly an incredible pain shot through Jacob's hip as he felt the joint tear apart for no reason.

Jacob realized that this was no ordinary man whom he fought. No, he had seen men like this before in a vision, walking up and down a stairway into the gates of heaven. And he remembered the oath he had sworn as he ran from his brother the first time, an oath sworn before God himself.

"God, if you're with me and watch over me, if you give me food to eat and clothes to wear, if you let me return home someday, then I will worship you. I will be the father of your nation." Hadn't God kept his end of the bargain? Jacob had safely lived with his father-in-law for years. Even now, he had food in his belly and clothes on his back. In fact, he was on his way to return home right now. God had never ceased to provide for him. God had kept his end of the bargain. But had Jacob?

Jacob collapsed to the ground, his leg throbbing in pain. He looked up at the stranger. The eyes had softened, waiting expectantly. Jacob realized whom he was staring at and his heart skipped a beat.

He remembered the stories of his grandfather Abraham, telling of the day the Lord came in human form and promised Abraham a son. The same thing was happening now. This man that Jacob had spent all night assuming he could defeat was God himself. And he had just conquered Jacob with a flick of His finger.

The man turned to leave and Jacob panicked. This was his chance. This was his opportunity to make everything right. God had come to him and was standing right in front of him. He thrust his arm out and grabbed the man by the heel. The man turned and spoke for the first time.

“Let me go.”

Jacob shook his head. He knew what he wanted. He didn't want to say it, but he knew. He wanted that which he had stolen from his brother... that which he had deceived from his father... that which he had swindled from his uncle. He wanted the one thing that no amount of trickery or strength could truly give him. Jacob forced the words out. “No. Not unless you bless me.”

The man smiled warmly and relaxed. “What's your name?”

“Jacob.” He replied.

“Your name is no longer Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and you have struggled with men. But now, you will struggle no longer. For with my blessing, with my covenant of love, with me by your side, you will always prevail.” Jacob was free. Free from the guilt of his past. Free from the pressure to conquer the world. Free from his own sinfulness.

How many of us have ever felt free? Oh, I don't mean free to vote, or free to own a gun, or free to worship in a church. I mean free from... everything! Free from a world that doesn't make sense. Free from the people and circumstances of our lives.

Free from ourselves. From the way that, like Jacob, we can so often be our own worst enemy. From the way that our choices and mistakes and sinfulness just pile upon us. Crushing us under a load of shame.

It's enough to make you jealous of Jacob. Jealous of the way God would seek out this chief of sinners and give him his blessing. Even if it did require a dislocated hip, how many of us would give our entire leg just to know for sure what God wanted from us and what it meant for our lives. To meet God personally, face to face.

But that's the remarkable thing about this story. This wasn't the only time God came to earth in the flesh. He came to earth in his Son too. And he comes to us. He comes in the sound of his Word. In the taste of bread and wine. In the touch of water.

And he doesn't require an arm and a leg from us. Or even a hip. All that was required was given on the cross of Calvary. God is here. Not in some inner spiritual struggle. Not in a symbolic remembrance. But in body and blood, as near as the man Jacob wrestled.

And God says to us, “You have struggled with the world your entire lives. And you have struggled with me and my plan for you your entire lives. And now, through my Son, you have prevailed! Through my Son you have a new name. A new identity. You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” And what could be more freeing than hearing God say that to us?

One of my favorite Christian bands sings this chorus: We're trying to convince the world we're something that we can't be. No matter how we struggle, we cannot be God's people. We cannot be God's sons. But his one and only begotten Son can be. And through his personal blessing, we claim his identity. And when we do, something amazing begins to happen. We believe it.

I didn't finish the story of Jacob this morning. I didn't tell you how Jacob... how Israel got up from that place and reconciled with his brother. How he raised 13 faithful sons who would father the tribes of the Israelite nation. How despite all Jacob's deficiencies, God was faithful to his word and made Jacob part of his plan of salvation.

We too are part of God's plan. We too are conformed daily to his identity. And when we commune with Christ through Word and Sacrament, our struggle comes to an end. For he makes us exactly who he wants us to be. Amen.